Make it visible. Improving validation and recognition of learning outside of formal education and training

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There are so many ways to learn. Formal education and training is only one of these, especially when it comes to acquiring knowledge, competencies, behaviours, and values necessary to perform a job properly. However, if people cannot document the “worth” of their skills, the learning acquired is often accounted as worthless in principle and also in practice by the labour market.

Validation is the process that makes learning acquired in non-formal and informal settings visible and ‘usable’ for the individual. Whatever they may call it - accreditation of prior learning, prior learning assessment – the underlying principle in validation is that all learning is valuable, irrespective of how or where it has been acquired. As learning is both a process (how it happens) and a product (the outcomes), by shifting the focus from the learning process to the learning outcomes validation makes visible and provides currency to the knowledge, skills and competences acquired out of the formal settings.

This approach has much to commend it. Today’s European labour market must confront with a continuous and accelerated process of transformation of the economy, as well as growing disparities between and within countries that have marginalised and impoverished specific groups of the population. As we know, it’s not just about young people out of the labour market, but also long-term unemployed, displaced workers, and low-skilled adults more generally.

Validation has a major role to play especially for people with low levels of formal education and training who may have acquired valuable skills and competences throughout their working life or even other experiences such as volunteer work. Identification, assessment and certification of their skills may be effective to tailor their training needs and make them more attractive to the labour market.

Since 2004, through the European Inventory Cedefop has been monitoring and analysing developments in validation of non-formal and informal occurring in EU Member States. Initially conceived as a way of opening up and making formal education and training more flexible, especially vocational education and training, validation is increasingly seen as a tool

1 The European Inventory on validation is a regularly updated overview of validation practises and arrangements across Europe developed by Cedefop in cooperation with the European Commission (http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory).
to make economies more competitive, encourage labour market participation, and combat social exclusion.

In 2012, the Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning was a step in this direction. The recommendation asked Member States to develop, no later than 2018, validation arrangements that allow citizens to get a qualification (or part of it) through the validation of learning acquired outside formal systems. This gave validation a new impetus and promoted more action at national level.

The 2016 update on validation of non-formal and informal learning\(^2\) shows that all countries in the European Union have in place or are developing, at least in one sector of education, systems that allow individuals to validate knowledge and skills acquired outside the formal system. In most cases, these validation procedures enable individuals to acquire a formal qualification or parts of it.

However, there is still a lot of room for improvement. There is a great diversity across countries as well as fragmentation within countries. In the same country validation might function relatively well in one specific sub-sector of education such as Vocational Education and Training (VET), while it does not exist in other sub-sectors. This implies that the outcomes of a validation process in VET, for example, cannot be used in General Education even though certain learning outcomes might be similar.

This fragmentation is more apparent where validation processes occur outside the formal established systems of education. HR practices in the private sector have very much to do with the identification, documentation, and assessment of individual skills. Although these practices may have a lot in common with formalised (national) systems for validation, and evaluate similar learning outcomes, public and private systems are usually not coordinated. In these circumstances the outcomes of private assessment procedures are not public and the individual cannot use them when changing companies or career pathway. While connecting public validation systems to private HR practices might sound ambitious, there is a great potential in bringing together employers and civil society organisations to coordinate and play a role in the national validation systems. The 2016 inventory found that 15 countries (of the 36 under study) had validation arrangements involving private sector institutions - alone or in collaboration with public sector institutions.

In conclusion, although more and more countries are establishing coordinating bodies to oversee validation arrangements in the different sectors and linking initiatives, more needs to be done to increase the coverage of validation arrangements. The full development of national qualification frameworks can play a major role in providing a link between the world of work and the world of education. Better trained practitioners, especially in guidance and counselling, would enable a better connection between labour market intelligence and validation possibilities.


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