



When competences become occupational opportunities

How informal and non-formal learning can be recognised and used in Europe

Claudia Gaylor, Nicolas Schöpf, Eckart Severing, Thomas Reglin

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This brochure looks at the education policy challenges which arise in respect of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe focusing on persons with low levels of formal qualification. It builds upon a study (see Gaylor, Schöpf, & Severing, 2015 for the Summary in German) on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning that was conducted within the scope of a Bertelsmann Stiftung project entitled "Continuing training for all". The object of investigation was the current nature of such procedures in eight European countries. In the continuation of this work presented here, which is based upon the examples of good practice identified in the study, possible courses of action are developed which are directed towards decision makers in the European Union and its member states at a policymaking, economic and societal level. The aim is to structure education systems in such a way so as to render them accessible also to persons with a low level of formal qualifications. The study forming the basis of the investigation is available in German from the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Ed.): Anerkennung von Kompetenzen. Was Deutschland von anderen Staaten lernen kann. Gütersloh 2015 (ISBN 978-3-86793-582-1).

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Table of contents

Preface	6
Summary	8
Overview	13
1. Why do we need to certify occupational know-how?	14
1.1 Informal and non-formal occupational learning	15
1.2 Absence of recognition of informal occupational learning	17
1.3 Informal occupational learning of persons with low levels of formal qualification	18
1.4 The relationship of validation procedures to formal educational qualifications	20
2. The concept of the study	22
3. Where does Europe stand?	27
3.1 Milestones along the route to the Council recommendation (2012)	27
3.2 The Recommendation of the Council of the European Union and the status of implementation	30
4. A look at various European countries – transfer impetuses and perspectives	40
4.1  Legal foundations	41
4.2  Procedures and instruments	45
4.3  Financing	52
4.4  Institutionalisation	56
4.5  Support	59
4.6 Country summary	63
5. Recommendations	64
5.1 On the character and use of the study	64
5.2 System differences	66
5.3 Stakeholders and areas of responsibility	68
5.4 Accessibility of procedures	69
5.5 Transparency instruments	71
5.6 Perspectives	72
Bibliography	74
Imprint	78

Preface

Those of us who grow up in Europe and participate in occupational training or study at universities, consider certificates to be self-evident. Educational diplomas lend our abilities value and open the path for us to further education and qualified professions.

However, a strong focus on formal degrees has a downside. Things learned outside of the formal educational system remain largely invisible. Thus, we devalue the acquisition of knowledge and skills which takes place over a lifetime - but usually outside the classical educational institutions. We learn on the job, in continuing education courses, through voluntary work or in the framework of our hobbies. With every daily challenge we continuously expand our technical, social and personal skills. Much of what we learn is also useful for our profession. But in many cases this knowledge is neither documented nor certified.

Germany and other countries urgently need binding, national (and regional) systems for the recognition and validation of knowledge, skills and competencies that are acquired non-formally or informally. There are social, economic and legal reasons in favour of this.

We know that in many countries there is a strong connection between education and social status. Persons with low levels of formal qualification in particular, primarily acquire professional know-how at work or while volunteering. However, in the existing systems this is of little use to them since these competencies do not sufficiently improve their chances on the labour market. As long as employers, politics and educational institutions show little interest in recognising non-formal and informal learning, they make the professional advancement and societal participation more difficult, in particular for the millions of so-called low-skilled persons.

This also applies to refugees and migrants that come to us. For them to successfully integrate, their knowledge and skills must be visible. We have to systematically review educational and professional degrees acquired in foreign countries for equivalence to formal domestic degrees and, if necessary, allow supplemental qualifications. However, we should also recognise qualifications acquired in practice or when certificates are lost in war and crisis areas. Otherwise, highly-qualified specialists with many years of professional experience will become “low-skilled” workers.

Being recognised, with one’s skills and abilities, affords a person a sense of value. When this is lacking, motivation and drive are accordingly lacking. However, companies and, not least, the social systems are increasingly reliant on this potential.

We will only be able to combat the demographics-related labour shortages in the decades to come if we exhaust all of the occupational skills of the European workforce. This applies to persons changing professions, re-entering the workforce and older workers as well as those with low levels of formal qualification and migrants. Thus, certification processes not only benefit all workers,

but also companies and society. In addition, the nation states have an obligation with regard to recognising skills. In a resolution dated December 20, 2012, the European Council prompted the member states to introduce certification options for non-formally and informally acquired knowledge, skills and competences by 2018. Many states are still far from implementing this agreement. In this context there is much we can learn from those among our European neighbours that are already more advanced.

Every French person and Norwegian has a legal claim to have his or her skills reviewed and certified. We find similar interesting approaches in Finland, Denmark or the Netherlands. Institutionally anchored and binding recognition procedures as well as clearly defined responsibilities generally enable cost-free certification for the citizens. Gaps in skills and knowledge are balanced out by means of continuing education which can then be awarded a qualification certificate equivalent to formal degrees. This ensures access, particularly for persons with low levels of formal qualification, and guarantees the acceptance of the recognition system in the economy and society.

We would like to thank all of the experts who participated in the study and the authors of this brochure. With their inspiring examples and transfer recommendations, they create a new awareness of the value of informal and non-formal learning. They contribute to a new culture so that individual knowledge, skills and competences can become professional opportunities in a lifelong and life-wide approach to learning.



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Member of the Executive Board
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President
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Summary

Many European states are debating how occupationally relevant knowledge, skills and competences can be recorded better and made visible. Some EU countries have made considerable progress in the identification and recognition of competences acquired via informal and non-formal means. They have established validation systems which accord such competences a value on the labour market. In other EU states, formal education is still virtually the only route which opens up access to the education system and to the labour market. Competences which people obtain informally in their job or leisure time or in continuing training not leading to certification are frequently given little value, although in many cases they may be more significant for employability skills than formally certified knowledge. That leads to the question of whether the formal education systems really provide and assess what is actually needed for occupation and can contribute to close the existing skills gap? Taking into account current labour market figures – there are roughly 2 million unfilled job vacancies and more than 22 million unemployed EU-wide – the validation of non-formal and informal learning will be more and more essential to the European labour market.

Many people are capable of more than is visible in certificates

People without formal general or vocational education and training qualifications, but with many years of occupational experience, and people with professional and occupational competences acquired abroad may be particular beneficiaries of validation of informal learning. Persons with low levels of formal qualification have usually acquired their occupational knowhow in an informal fashion. They are especially dependent on making use of learning opportunities which they receive, so to say, “en passant” and outside educational and training institutions. These may occur during work activities, via exchanges with colleagues and in their free time. It should be emphasised that “persons with low levels of formal qualification” does not mean that such persons are not in possession of any occupationally relevant qualifications or competences. The opposite is frequently the case. Someone who has dropped out of higher education but has been configuring IT systems for a decade, a Syrian engineer who cannot present any documentation having fled his homeland and a widow with years of experience of providing care within the family environment are all professionally competent despite having little in the way of formal qualifications. This is where the crux of the matter lies in a society that is geared towards certification. Educational certificates are not merely instruments which express occupational competences. They also overshadow competences for which there is no certificate.

In earlier times when technological development was more sedate, there may largely have been a close correlation between certificates and competences. Learning took place and was certified within the education system before being applied for a lifetime. Knowledge work and rapid innovation cycles have, however, rendered this sequential model of occupational learning obsolete in many regards. More and more professional competences are being acquired continuously, on an in-service basis and in a self-directed manner rather than having been obtained prior to em-

barking upon a career. This applies to simple and complex tasks alike. The acquisition of occupational knowledge, skills and competences is self-made and no longer predominantly the domain of traditional educational institutions. Unfortunately, this does not apply to their certification. This remains closely tied in with educational institutions which display little readiness to recognise learning outside the courses they offer.

Recognising competences and making them usable via a good validation system

In many European countries, there is an absence of opportunities for the utilisation of competences that are not evidenced in the form of qualifications and certificates. Such competences are often used in the current workplace, but are usually not documented let alone certified. The few procedures available, such as the EUROPASS, do not yet form a generally recognised standard in application processes in the employment system. It is also the case that procedures for the documentation and certification of occupational competences or certificates acquired by non-formal means are often eclipsed by formal qualifications. The former are usually only used in a supplementary way. The formal education system creates hurdles, not only for persons with low levels of formal qualification, because it seldom recognises competences acquired via informal and non-formal means and does not link such competences with perspectives for higher-level formal training.

In the light of demographic decline and rising requirements in the world of work at the same time, this means that there is a societal problem as well as an individual problem. Many young adults are not in possession of a vocational qualification. Validation procedures would tap into a huge area of competence potential and could also reduce unemployment amongst workers with low levels of formal qualification. The education system and the labour market must also be increasingly opened up for those with atypical, highly different educational or occupational histories, such as persons with foreign qualifications or persons who are in possession of a vocational qualification but in practice have pursued quite another work activity.

Against this background in 2012, the Council of the European Union recommended that member states should create opportunities for the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning by the year 2018.

Validation systems work. How can we learn from one another in Europe?

In some European countries, there are already procedures in place which lead to certificates that can be utilised on the labour market and to access qualifications within the education system. The study “Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Germany”, which was conducted within the scope of a Bertelsmann Stiftung project entitled “Continuing training for all”, looked at good practice in Europe. The focus was on five core elements which affect central issues and aspects of a validation system. These will initially be briefly outlined here.



Legal foundations: an investigation was undertaken into the nature of the legal basis of the validation of informal learning and in which area it applies so as to render the results of validation procedures binding and utilisable. In France, for example, there is a comprehensive right for validation of competences acquired over a period of work activity of at least three years. This validation leads to official certification which is the equivalent of initial training in legal terms.



Procedures and instruments: efficient procedures delivering meaningful results are required. This secures acceptance and increases demand. In Denmark, for example, a two-stage certification procedure has been established. Individually demonstrated competences are recorded on a certificate and compared with defined learning outcomes from educational and training courses with the support of a vocational education and training centre for adults. In the next stage, this certificate can be used for personal planning of further training or for entry to the labour market.



Financing: validation costs money. For this reason, the creation of financing structures and a response to the question of who pays what amount of costs for the validation or qualification procedure are of crucial significance. In Europe, state-funded, company-based, private sector and various mixed forms of financing are all in place. In countries where there is a tradition of provision of educational and training provision on a free-of-charge basis, this has frequently exerted a positive effect on validation. In such cases, there is then a right to receive financing which is predominantly publicly provided. In Finland, the Ministries of Education and Labour share the costs of validation supplemented by a small contribution for fixed costs, which may be higher if candidates are in receipt of an income. Relevant mixed forms based on means testing could offer a starting point as an alternative to full public financing. In the Netherlands and France, companies participate in the financing of the validation by releasing their staff.



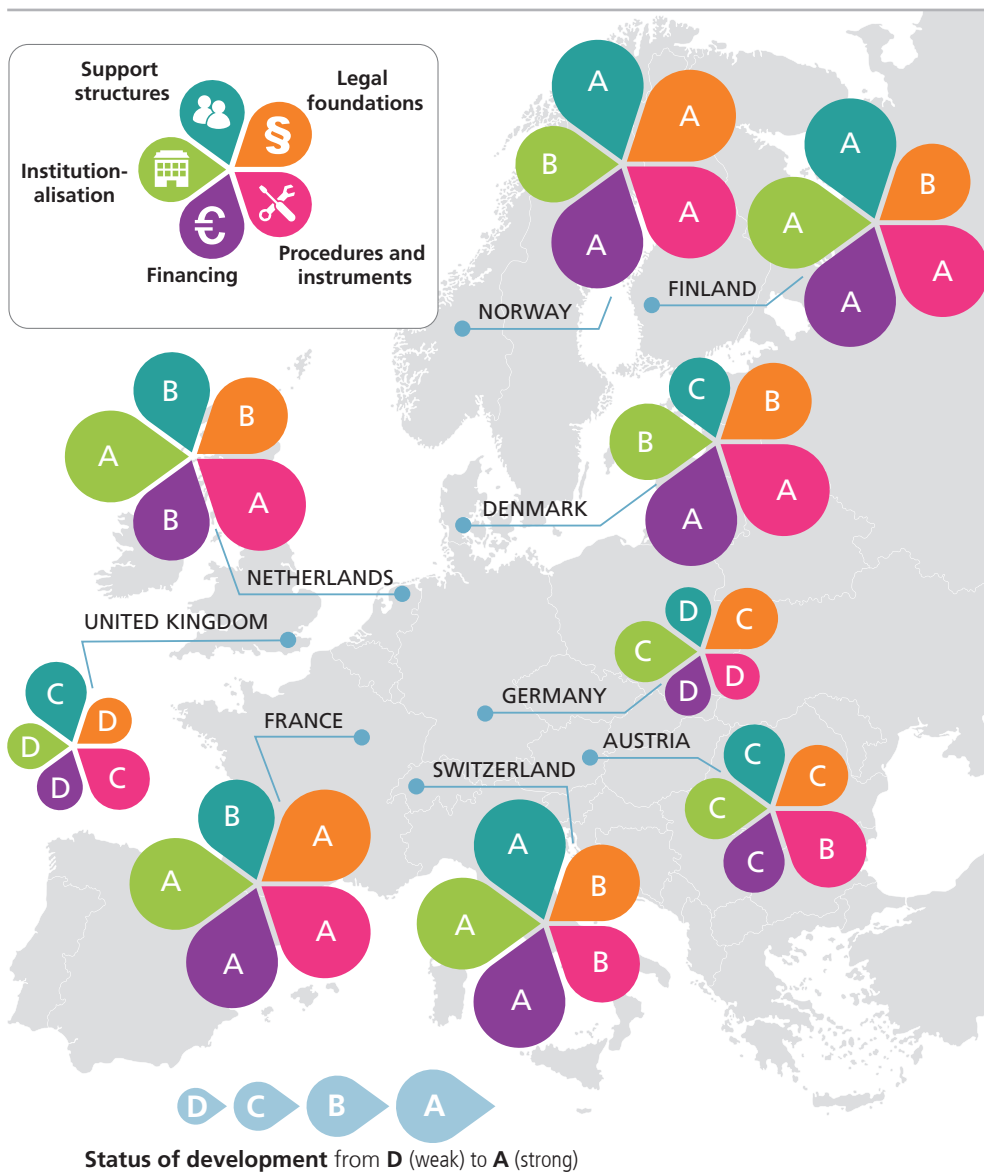
Institutionalisation: firm institutionalisation is an essential prerequisite for general acceptance of certification of competences acquired by non-formal or informal means. Clarification needs to take place as to which stakeholders are involved in which role and in which area of responsibility and as to the way in which they are networked. In Switzerland, the validation of education and training is a cooperative task carried out by the branch representatives/professional associations, the Federal Government and the cantons.



Support structures: users of complex recognition procedures require low-threshold access to information and guidance. In Finland, face-to-face advice and support is offered all over the country. There are also websites and online chats with experts, who impart information on qualifications and the validation procedure.

The following figure of the countries forming the object of investigation shows a comparison of the status of development of a validation strategy along the five core elements in accordance with the quality criteria from D (weak) to A (strong).

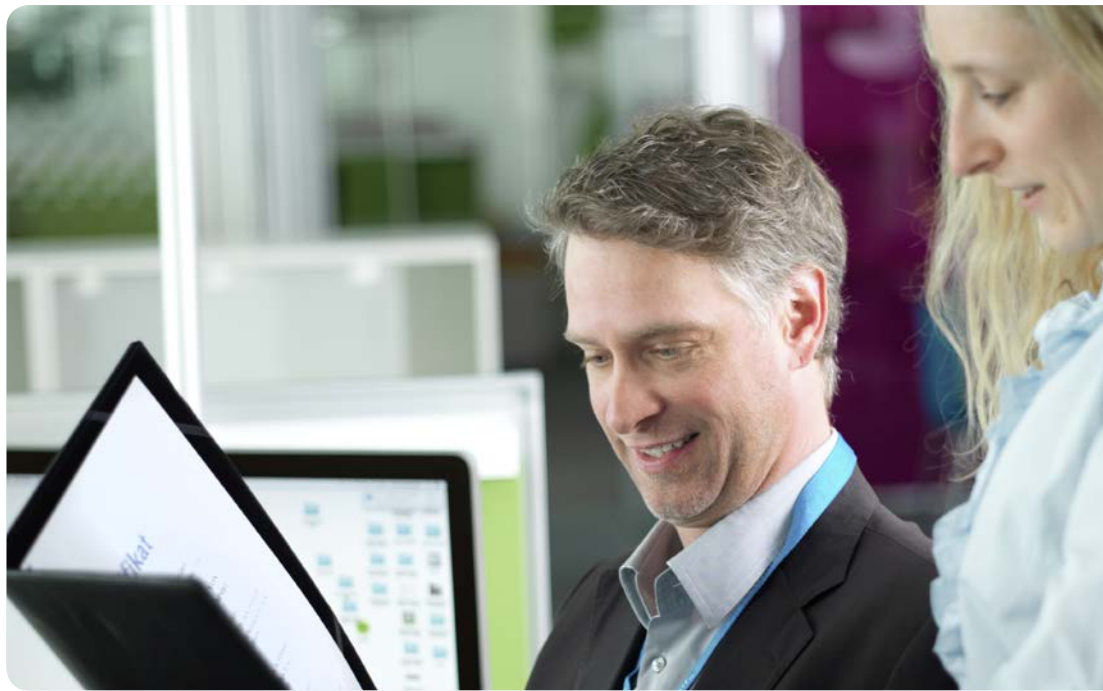
Figure 1: European comparison



Sources: own representation.

The grid proposed here is intended as an analytical tool for policy guidance in the field of the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means. It supports the analysis of existing national validation practices with the aim of identifying good practice and deriving opportunities for transfer to other European states. Educational stakeholders and education and training policy are recommended to undertake the following steps to draw up a strategy for the (ongoing) development of a national validation system.

1. The country's own recognition system is *described* on the basis of the five core elements, and the status achieved is *evaluated* in accordance with a four-level scale. This foundation is used to *define* a specific *development goal*.
2. The *general framework conditions* of the vocational education and training system, such as degree of formalisation of VET, status of use of competence assessment and transparency instruments, competence orientation of formal vocational education and training and existing stakeholder structures, are all taken into account during this process.
3. Appropriate *transfer references are selected*, i.e. there is an identification of countries which are characterised by exhibiting sufficient proximity to the country's own VET system and by displaying more advanced validation practice. If deemed necessary, the empirical basis of the present study is expanded by considering *further country examples*.
4. *Transfer approaches are drawn up*. For this purpose, the validation system in the reference country or countries is examined in more detail, information on implementation strategies is obtained, desired and undesired effects are identified and system differences are stated which make modifications necessary for implementation in the country concerned.



Overview

The present brochure draws upon examples of good practice identified in the study “Validating competences – What Germany can learn from other countries”. It aims to provide political, economic and societal stakeholders with suggestions for the structuring of a validation system, depending upon the current status of development in each country.

The brochure is set out as follows.

- **Section 1** explains why the recognition of informal occupational learning is one of the most important topics for future VET policy.
- **Section 2** briefly presents the methodological concept behind the study.
- **Section 3** outlines and provides a short summary of the current situation in Europe.
- **Section 4** presents exemplary concepts from European countries for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It illustrates how transfer opportunities can be identified and made utilisable within the context of European “peer learning”.
- **Section 5** shows how transfer approaches can be derived from the examples of good practice.

1. Why do we need to certify occupational know-how?

Many young adults in Europe are not in possession of a vocational qualification that can be utilised on the labour market. Continuing vocational training has not as yet assumed any compensatory function. It is exacerbating educational hierarchies in society rather than balancing them out. The focus of reform considerations therefore needs to be on eliminating existing barriers to continuing training – a lack of guidance, low incentives to learn and an absence of recognition of competences acquired via informal and non-formal means. We also, however, need to look at individual obstacles. Workers with low levels of formal qualifications frequently lack self-confidence and the necessary motivation to learn. Many have had experience of failure in the education system and therefore reject further school-based learning provision.

But this does not mean that those without a vocational qualification have not gained or acquired any occupationally utilisable competences. The contrary is the case. “Persons with low levels of formal qualification”¹ are particularly dependent on using learning opportunities which they receive en passant outside the education system, during work activity, via exchanges with colleagues and in their leisure time, and they also avail themselves of these.

In some European states in which institutionalisation of the vocational training system is comparatively weak, such as in the United Kingdom, procedures have been established to facilitate the obtaining of evidence for informal knowledge and competences which is of some value within the education system and on the labour market. For those European countries in which such recognition structures are not yet in place, it may be useful to investigate whether they are able to learn from their neighbours and adapt procedures and instruments that have proved their worth in such states. Cross-border comparative structures of the type that have become established in many areas of educational research may open up conceptual perspectives. Something which appears to be unshakeable and without alternative in an education system may merely be the result of traditions that have remained unquestioned and long since become obsolete. Alternative problem-solving models in other countries may show that changes can take place and demonstrate the approach that can be adopted in order to achieve such changes. They may also, however, display the undesired effects educational reforms can cause. Nevertheless, identification of good practice alone is not sufficient. Acceptance and effectiveness in solutions piloted elsewhere are too dependent on the context, on the particular general conditions that apply within the education system and on the labour market of a particular country. Transfer only works if instruments for the recognition of informally acquired knowledge that are effective in other states are carefully adapted to the prevailing conditions of the country to which they are to be transferred.

¹ The term “persons with low levels of formal qualification” as used here and below refers to those who are in possession of a vocational or higher education qualification but who are no longer able to exercise the occupational activity in which they have trained following more than four years in an unskilled or semi-skilled job. It is also used to indicate persons who do not have a higher education qualification nor a vocational qualification for which a training duration of at least two years is prescribed.

1.1 Informal and non-formal occupational learning

Most people primarily take “occupational learning” to mean professional or vocational training that has taken place within the scope of company-based training, at a vocational school, at an institute of higher education or at another educational establishment. A secondary understanding of the term is in reference to continuing training via courses and seminars. This excludes a significant area of the acquisition of professional and vocational knowledge and competences. This comes as no surprise given the fact that the focus is on learning pathways which are not as manifest, institutionally respected, documented or certified as learning at educational establishments.

In a process which began in the USA before later spreading to Europe, vocational education and training research has been looking at “informal learning” since the 1960’s. Informal learning is a type of learning which is unorganised and perhaps also untargeted, and which, so to speak, takes place incidentally and outside educational organisations. The results of this research show that, only a few years after initial training, most of the occupationally relevant knowledge and competences is acquired via learning at the workplace, by networking with colleagues and experts, in leisure time and through the use of non-pedagogical media. In a knowledge society, nursery schools, schools and universities are not the only venues in which learning takes place. Learning permeates all societal institutions and is no longer limited to the first third of a person’s biography. The ideal of initial training as a means of imparting as much as possible of the knowledge and competence required in working life prior to commencement of an occupation has its origins in an educational policy concept of a society of skilled work in the 1960’s and 1970’s. As the cycle of occupational knowledge continues to turn ever more rapidly, this concept is becoming obsolete at the same pace. For this reason, informal knowledge is by no means considered to be a second-rate form of vocational learning. It is just as important and necessary as formal (qualifications-related) learning and non-formal learning (organised but not qualifications related). However, one important difference needs to be borne in mind. Formal learning is aligned towards the imparting of stipulated learning concepts, whereas informal learning is characterised by its openness. Learning usually takes place without pedagogical pre-structuring. The learning impetus frequently results from practical requirements, and learning occurs as these requirements are overcome.

Although the quantitative significance of informal learning at companies is often underestimated, empirical findings from Germany show that its importance is certainly recognised by occupational practitioners. In a representative study into awareness of continuing training amongst the working-age population in Germany, only 14 percent of respondents state that formalised learning is the most important learning context for them. 87 percent think that other learning contexts are more significant, particularly “work-related learning” (58 percent) (Baethge, Baethge-Kinsky 2004: 43). At the same time in Germany, company-based continuing training accounted for a proportion of 69 percent of all continuing training activities (instances of participation). This makes it the largest area in this regard (the corresponding figures for individual occupationally related continuing training and non-occupationally related continuing training being 13 percent and 18

percent respectively, survey period 2012; BMBF 2013: 17). The Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) demonstrates the high degree of importance of continuing training across the whole of Europe. Compared to the data from 2005, the findings from 2010 (CVTS 4) revealed a significant growth in company-based continuing training provision in many countries.

There are several reasons why educational policymakers and training managers at companies and educational institutions have in recent years joined educational researchers in recognising informal occupational learning as a central topic.

- As far as the *companies* are concerned, the fact that occupational knowledge no longer changes at long time intervals has made it necessary to focus initial vocational training more on the imparting of underlying competences that will be useful in the long term whilst by the same token placing a greater emphasis on fostering *lifelong learning*. This necessity is naturally less urgent in static occupations, such as in a few departments of the craft trades, in simple service sector jobs and in straightforward work activities than in occupations which feature a high speed of innovation and complex knowledge work. The switch from a manufacturing to a service-based society means that the success of an increasing number of companies depends on making productive use of knowledge work. These companies are unable to rely upon the external provision of skills and competences in the institutions of the education system, which are made accessible via recruitment of those who complete education and training. They are dependent on leaps in knowledge made by their experts and therefore on the continuous expansion of the knowledge base in the company.
- *Education and training* policy faces the challenge of a segmented labour market. Whereas there is a shortage of skilled staff in some areas, unemployment amongst low-skilled workers remains high. Second-chance vocational qualifications for adults represent one means of countering this segmentation. Progressive educational policy also needs to take into account that future skilled worker potential will be recruited from a heterogeneous group of persons without formal school-leaving or vocational qualifications, with foreign qualifications which are difficult to assess or with qualifications acquired many years previously in occupations different to those exercised rather than predominantly from domestic school leavers. Persons with such atypical educational and training histories need to have points of access opened up for them within the education system and on the labour market in order to reduce their risk of unemployment and to enable possible shortages of skilled workers caused by demographic reasons to be countered. In educational policy terms, therefore, not least of the areas in which attention should be paid is on making learning visible and more valuable throughout a person's occupational history.
- In a Recommendation of 20 December 2012, the Council of the European Union called upon member states to create opportunities for the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means by 2018, in other words to make it possible for individuals to obtain validation of learning outcomes achieved via an informal or non-formal route and to use this as

the basis for receipt of a full or partial qualification. Validation is defined as “a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard”. In its Recommendation, the European Council places particular emphasis on increasing the employability skills of socially disadvantaged persons and of unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

Knowledge work fosters and facilitates informal learning. In contrast to Taylorist settings, more complex work activities offer learning opportunities and often also the autonomy that self-directed learners require. The level of activity requirements has risen in recent decades. This applies both to operational tasks and to complex specialist and management activities. Responsibility for education and training is delegated to the employees themselves. In many cases, they exercise a high degree of autonomy in their work rather than any longer merely being the passive recipients of work instructions. Within this process, informal learning has priority over institutionalised learning and other less flexible forms of learning. Many employees, particular those with high levels of formal qualification, shape their own qualifications. They “invest” in their education and training and take advantage of learning opportunities which promise to be occupationally utilisable. But also the so-called “low-skilled” obtain much of their occupational know-how informally on the job. They, however, are currently less able to profit from it career-wise. Validation systems that identify, document, assess, and certify their knowledge, skills and competences, offer a great opportunity especially for those who have no or low formal qualifications. However, these target groups require support structures that help motivate and empower them in their career-management competences, or else the validation systems will only benefit those who already possess formal qualifications.

1.2 Absence of recognition of informal occupational learning

In individual and societal terms, it is of great importance both to acquire knowledge, skills and competences and to render it visible and appraisable. Recruitment to occupational positions, the shaping of professional careers and progression to continuing training courses all depend on whether persons are in possession of certificates which demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competences to others in a reliable manner. Formal education offers such a construct in the form of a graded system of qualifications and certificates. This does not, however, apply to either informal learning or non-formal learning. If any certificates at all are offered within the latter field, they mostly do not relate to a reference framework and this do not create the necessary reliability on the labour market.

Although occupational learning predominantly takes place in informal contexts, many European countries have developed an infrastructure which mainly focuses on making formalised initial and continuing training visible. The willingness of the established educational institutions to agree to “external certifications” has been limited thus far due to the fact that such organisations fear for their monopoly status. This presents a major challenge. Informal occupational learning is indeed becoming more significant for companies, employees and job seekers. New forms of work organisation and new media offer additional learning opportunities. However, the usability of learning

outcomes is severely limited if they do not become visible beyond the narrow environment of the learners. The productivity of informal occupational learning is lagging significantly behind the areas of potential it offers.

Usability on the labour market is not the only aspect which can be improved by effective systems for the recognition of occupational competences acquired by informal means. Such systems can also assist with increasing occupational mobility and provide the motivation to take part in further education and training activities.

1.3 Informal occupational learning of persons with low levels of formal qualification

Persons with low levels of formal qualification will continue to be accorded a low degree of consideration in vocational education and training policy for as long as the need of trade and industry for skilled workers is covered.

This is a situation which is beginning to change in some European countries, not least because of demographic development. In Germany, for example, the expectation is that the number of young persons aspiring to enter training could fall by up to 20 percent in the foreseeable future (BIBB 2014; AGBB 2014; Thieß et al. 2015). This will lead to a segmented labour market which features an uncovered demand for qualified skilled work on one side and on the other side a supply of workers with low levels of formal qualification for whom no demand exists.

For this reason, the idea of *tapping into skills reserves* is coming to the fore of VET and labour market policy considerations. Not least of the issues in this regard is how adults without a vocational qualification can be better trained and how their occupational competences can be rendered more visible.

- One strategy, that of “better training”, is being pursued in some countries via programmes which offer a second chance to obtain formal qualifications within the regulated system of initial vocational training. Nevertheless, most such activities are covered by temporary initiatives and projects which are also located at interfaces between the responsibilities of VET and labour market policy that are not always clearly defined. The result is that general conditions display little in the way of consistency and reliability, and this also leads to a low level of transparency with regard to funding opportunities for the persons with low levels of formal qualification themselves and for companies and educational institutions. Experience shows that this is anyway a route that is fraught with difficulty. Large numbers of those targeted have experienced disappointments in their previous training history and have reservations towards examination situations. In addition to this, many avoid education and training provision which leads to a temporary deterioration in their income, which is low in the first place. However, motivation on the part of the companies to support semi-skilled and unskilled workers in continuing training leading to a vocational qualification is also not always manifest. Some companies fear higher

staff turnover or restrictions in the deployability of employees who set themselves ambitious qualification goals.

- The other strategy, “*documentation and recognition of existing occupational competences*”, is based on the thesis that persons with low levels of formal qualification have acquired competences that may be occupationally utilisable during the course of their previous or present work and social activities.

The latter thesis could be contradicted by the general supposition that workers with low levels of formal qualification are often deployed to perform simple work activities which do not exhibit a high degree of training potential. Nevertheless, a differentiation needs to be drawn. Firstly, many persons with low levels of formal qualification are inadequately qualified rather than unqualified. A good number of them are in possession of elaborated occupational knowledge, skills and competences which they are, however, unable to utilise on the labour market. Secondly, a change has also taken place with regard to work activities. Simple work no longer comprises repetitive manual actions for which routine and training are required rather than skill and competence. It is perfectly possible for many activities below skilled worker level to contain complex control and monitoring tasks. In the service sector, marked social and communication competence may be required.

Another point is that learning and work merge, even in merely operational activities. The use of IT technologies for the management of work processes and machines and as a learning medium have created the technical conditions under which work equipment itself may act as a vehicle for imparting the knowledge necessary for its operation and maintenance. Learning sequences are directly introduced into even simple workplaces. These take place independently of the learning venue via “mobile learning”, in didactic terms in the form of micro learning units and in technical terms through integration into the management of the work process. This situation is already far advanced in areas where IT is the main tool. Operators are provided with short learning sequences in circumstances such as where entry errors have been made. Assistants in vehicle workshops receive error-specific maintenance instructions. Workers are offered precisely the learning modules necessary for accomplishment of the task at hand. The progress of new learning media towards “virtual” and “augmented reality” indicate the further direction of travel.

The importance of informal learning for workers with low levels of formal qualification is in turn demonstrated by empirical results from Germany. Nevertheless, access to informal learning for adult workers depends heavily on formal educational status, the Adult Education Survey AES² (2012) indicates a participation rate of 69 percent for higher education graduates, as compared to only 32 percent for formally low-qualified persons, 64 percent for persons with an upper secondary

² The “Adult Education Survey” (AES) is a “data collection on the participation and non-participation of adults in lifelong learning”, which has been mandatorily conducted in the member states of the European Union since 2011 and which also measures aspects such as participation in informal learning. In Germany, a representative sample of the population aged between 18 and 64 was surveyed in 2012. A total of 7,099 persons were asked about their learning activities in the previous twelve months.

educational qualification and 33 percent for those with a lower secondary qualification. Informal learning thus has very little impact on reducing educational differences. However, the focus here is also on low-skilled workers themselves rather than merely upon the relations between the groups of different educational status. Their participation rates of 32 percent (informal learning) and 37 percent (non-formal learning) contrast with a participation rate in formal learning of 12 percent (Behringer, Schönfeld 2014: 5; Kuwan, Seidel 2013: 266). This shows that the route to competence development for low-skilled workers is predominantly via non-formal and informal learning.

It is even more sobering when the growth in competences that results from informal learning does not lead to an improvement in employment opportunities. The PIAAC Study³ showed that, in Germany and the USA, occupational competences (in the case of formally low-skilled men) do not lead to a reduction in the risk of unemployment. The non-employment rate of persons with low levels of formal qualification in Germany remains approximately the same across the various competence levels at approaching 30 percent. By way of contrast, this non-employment rate reduces in other countries (Austria, Denmark, Netherlands, United Kingdom) in the case of higher competences, even if there is no formal vocational qualification (Heisig, Solga 2013). The reason for this may be that the importance of vocational qualifications for labour market integration is higher in Germany than in the other countries.

1.4 The relationship of validation procedures to formal educational qualifications

In the debate centring on procedures for the validation of competences acquired by informal and non-formal means, a major role is played by the relationship of such competences to the examination and certification processes of the formal education system. The focus is on the essential question of whether certificates which attest occupational knowledge, skills and competences enjoy the same degree of awareness and recognition as formal educational certificates or whether they are of a non-binding character only.

Fundamentally, three models are conceivable.

- *Adaptation to the formal system* sets the latter as a reference system. Competences acquired by informal means are recognised as equivalent to the extent that it can be demonstrated that they correspond to the standards, e.g. the learning contents of recognised vocational education and training.
- *Expansion* involves recording and evaluating competences acquired by informal and non-formal means separately from the evidence procedures in the formal education system and then a second stage in which they are related to a formal educational status. It may be ascertained that

3 The PIAAC Study measures aspects such as basic cognitive competences (reading competence, everyday mathematical competence, technology-oriented problem solving). The 2011/12 survey encompassed 160,000 respondents aged between 16 and 65 in 24 countries. In Germany, there were 5,650 respondents, in the 25 to 54 age group 3,440 + 560 (over-sample in the federal states in the former East Germany).

a subject has mastery of part of the contents of a course of vocational education and training. This is not usually associated with equal recognition.

- *Parallel validation procedures* are not aligned to the standards of the formal education system. For this reason, they are more open. Competences not mapped in these standards are also considered. Such procedures are more closely geared to individual educational biographies than the two other processes and may be designated as “development oriented”. Their deficiency is that equivalence of the competences documented with the formal qualifications cannot be evidenced and that there is no external usability or even equivalence in the education system or on the labour market.

In the current debate, clear preferences for the first option – adaptation to the formal system – are discernible. The aim is to prevent costly validation procedures from simply leading to inferior certificates with a low market value. Nevertheless, this integration route is more difficult than merely external referencing to the formal education system within the meaning of expansion or the deployment of parallel procedures which remain without reference to the regulated system. Certifications of equivalence require procedures which are able to test competences acquired by formal and non-formal means in a valid manner. They also need to be legally secure and administrable. Nor must they be permitted to diminish the significance and ranking of the formal certifications against which they seek to measure themselves.

At the same time, insufficient consideration is accorded to the diversity of informally and non-formally acquired competences if certifying institutions only relate them to the formal referencing system via examination requirements. Competences prove their worth in work activities, not in their correspondence to curricula and examination standards in statutorily regulated initial and continuing training. This means that additional new reference systems based on learning outcomes⁴ need to be established which lead to certifications equivalent to formal educational courses. Persons with low levels of formal qualification would otherwise be particularly disadvantaged. Although they would have access to certification of their knowledge, skills, and competences, they would be forced to undergo examination procedures that are aligned towards the acquisition of knowledge in formal arrangements, such as teaching, seminars and courses. Nevertheless, this hurdle has been diminishing for some time as a reorientation of the measurement of performance in the formal education system is beginning, at least in vocational education and training. Modern examination procedures focus more on evidence of employability skills and less on the reproduction of examination knowledge. It may be the case that the competence orientation that formal vocational education and training is endeavouring to achieve will also make it easier for workers with low levels of formal qualification to demonstrate their occupational competences in the regulated system.

⁴ Learning outcomes are defined as a “set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has learning attainments acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process, either formal, non-formal or informal. Statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.” Cedefop (2014): Terminology of European education and training policy. Luxembourg, S. 165f.

2. The concept of the study

The focus of the study on which the present brochure is based is on analysing the status quo of recognition of non-formal and informal learning in selected European countries. The situation is initially assessed by looking at five core elements. These are the legal foundations, the procedures and instruments, institutionalisation, financing and support structures. This forms the basis for a subsequent evaluation via quality criteria and a comparison between the countries forming the object of consideration. One key question is whether the validation system in one country can provide impetuses for improvement of the recognition procedures in other countries and which general educational policy conditions need to be created in order for transfer to take place.

Globalisation and European integration form a joint reference framework for vocational training. Although education systems in Europe may have different traditions, they are facing very similar challenges in the form of segmentation of labour markets between highly qualified and low-qualified workers with a concomitant decrease in employment opportunities for the latter, speed of innovation which renders lifelong learning a necessity and marked demographic declines in many cases. The comparison criterion is - how do various education systems deal with these challenges? This comparison also has a practical aspect. The countries of Europe are involved in a process of economic exchange and competition, and one major element of this is the effectiveness of the national education systems. The question which arises is as follows. How much success is being achieved in terms of ensuring that those who have lost out educationally can become connected, secure their income and make productive contributions to societal prosperity? In light of the heterogeneity of vocational education and training systems in Europe and their varying traditions, institutional structures, degrees of regulation and responsible stakeholders, such a comparison cannot be anything more than an impetus for “peer learning” of European education systems and a stimulus for addressing good validation practice in Europe. Any notion that congruent implementation of foreign procedures could take place in the structures of another country would be naive. Nevertheless, it is also correct that openness and a desire to explore the bigger picture are important maxims for the development of education systems. To this extent, travel broadens the horizons, perhaps also with regard to endeavours to achieve a stable system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe.

The aim and conceptual approach of the original study

Aim

Investigation of the procedures and general conditions for the validation of non-formal and informal learning of persons with low levels of formal qualification in selected countries of Europe and analysis of the opportunities for a transfer of successful recognition procedures to Germany.

Approach

Part I:

A consideration of the status quo of recognition of non-formal and informal learning on the basis of the five core elements of legal foundations, the procedures and instruments, institutionalisation, financing and support structures, evaluation of the situation in accordance with defined quality criteria.

Part II:

Description and analysis of the status quo of the national recognition systems in eight European countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Netherlands, Norway, United Kingdom and Germany. In addition to this, reference will also be made to the country study from Switzerland drawn up within the scope of the "2014 European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning".

Part III:

Derivation of transfer perspectives.

Publication (German language):

Bertelsmann Stiftung (Ed.): Anerkennung von Kompetenzen. Was Deutschland von anderen Staaten lernen kann. Gütersloh 2015 (ISBN 978-3-86793-582-1).

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/kompetenzen_ankennen

Two methodological strands were intertwined for the recording and evaluation of options for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Europe – the selection of core elements and the determination of quality criteria.

- The **core elements** describe the various constitutive dimensions of the validation of informal and non-formal learning. They are aligned to the eleven principles of the “European Guidelines on validation of non-formal and informal learning” published by Cedefop. In the country reports, their purpose was to record the respective national status quo in a systematic manner and to form the grid for the comparison of the European countries forming the object of investigation.



Legal foundations: existence and scope of application of statutory regulations for validation.



Procedures and instruments: process of validation, access to validation procedures, acceptance of results on the labour market, target group-specific or overarching approaches.



Financing: legal and conceptual opportunities in place, particularly with a view to certain target groups.



Institutionalisation: role of the stakeholders involved and regulation of areas of responsibility.








Support structures: existence of information and guidance provision and support structures for the validation procedure.

- **Quality criteria** are scaled in four stages (**A** to **D**) with regard to what has been achieved for the respective core element. The intention is for them to be used to assess the status of development of the five core elements. The quality criteria are also based on the “Guiding Principles on validation of non-formal and informal learning” developed by Cedefop. For each core element, the graphical representation of the situation in the countries considered concentrates on the quality criteria which describe the availability and sustainability of the procedures and structures deployed, the extent to which these are integrated into the national education system and which usability options they offer to the interested parties.

Bringing the core elements and quality criteria together produces the following four-level scale for the categorisation of the country examples considered in the study.

- In the case of the *legal foundations*, the least favourable case would be **D**. This indicates that no particular sort of regulation applies. One level above, **C**, means that statutory regulations are discernible in individual cases or for individual procedures. To the extent that national statutory validation regulations are in existence, differentiation need to be drawn between **B**, which indicates a limited legal right to validation (such as part of the right of adults to access a vocational qualification) or **A** for an unrestricted such right (i.e. not only in connection with a formal qualification).
- In the case of the *procedures and instruments* deployed for validation, the least favourable score of **D** shows a large degree of heterogeneity and short-lived provision without any discernible standardisation and quality assurance. One level above, **C**, indicates procedures which are still heterogeneous but which are subject to overarching quality assurance. **B** is for standardised procedures with a limited sphere of effect (such as those deployed regionally or for certain target groups), and this is differentiated from category **A** for standardised, statutorily regulated procedures leading to recognition within the educational and employment system.
- With regard to gradation of *financing* models for validation from the point of view of those aspiring to validation, the least favourable case is **D** = financing is exclusively or predominantly provided by the participants. **A** means that there are financing models being piloted within the scope of programmes and projects, but that these do not have a fundamental or permanent application. To the extent that financing of validation is not or not primarily provided by those aspiring to validation, category **B** indicates that validation is wholly financed or funded within the scope of a competence validation process initiated by a company or government authority. Above this, **A** means that there is an individual right to public financing of competence validation procedures.
- The degree of *institutionalisation* of the validation, which also finds expression in the status of the validation institutions within the education system, is an indicator of the binding status of the procedure and of reliability. The least favourable case **D** indicates that no areas of responsibility are established, whereas **C** shows the existence of such areas of responsibility within the framework of individual procedures. Some countries exhibit clearly regulated areas of responsibility with decentralised implementation via training providers or regional authorities (**B**). Category **A** indicates the best assurance of equivalence of the certification outcomes of validation procedures with formal certifications.
- In the case of the *support* structures, the lowest level **A** shows that such structures are in place in isolated areas. Above this level, **C** means that there are broadly based guidance and assistance opportunities but that these are poorly coordinated and exhibit a low level of professionalism. **B** indicates established guidance and support structures which enjoy a high level of awareness and professionalism, differentiated in turn from **A** to show full and central coverage of well-known guidance and support provision.

Table 1: Tabular representation of the core elements and quality criteria used in the study

Core elements	Items /scaling				Quality criteria
	D	C	B	A	
 Legal foundations	No or other forms of statutory regulation in place	Individual regulated instruments in place	Statutorily regulated procedure with limited legal right to validation	Statutorily regulated procedure with unlimited legal right to validation	Regulations in place/ not in place; legal claim limited or not limited
 Procedures/ instruments	Heterogeneous procedures and instruments without standardisation, quality assurance and binding status	Heterogeneous procedures subject to quality assurance	Standardised procedures and instruments with quality assurance but a limited sphere of effect (deployed regionally or for certain occupational groups)	Statutorily regulated binding procedure(s) with quality assurance system and wide-ranging scope	Scope, standardisation, quality assurance, binding status
 Financing	Private financing solely or predominantly by participants	Temporary or regionally established financing models	Financing of validation procedures instigated by government authorities or companies	Right to predominantly public financing	Private versus public, time dimension
 Institutionalisation	No areas of responsibility discernible	Areas of responsibility discernible within the scope of individual procedures	Clear areas of responsibility with decentralised implementation and quality assurance	Regulated areas of responsibility via legal remit and/or accreditation and/or high degree of awareness and recognition	Sphere of effect, permanence, binding status
 Support	Isolated guidance and support structures with low level of awareness	Broadly based guidance and support structures in place, but poorly coordinated and exhibiting a low level of professionalism	Broadly based guidance and support structures in place, awareness and professionalism	Broadly based central guidance and support structures with connected information provision (national strategy)	Accessibility, full coverage, awareness, sustainability

Sources: own representation.

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3. Where does Europe stand?

For over two decades now, endeavours have been ongoing at a European level to promote transparency and validation of knowledge, skills and competences regardless of the route via which these have been acquired. The aim is to provide equal recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Whereas procedures for the assessment of learning outcomes and certification are firmly established in formal education, such procedures are not firmly established for the validation of competences acquired via non-formal or informal learning in most European member states.

The “Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning”, which was adopted by the Council of the European Union in December 2012 (2012/C 398/01),⁵ now provides a proposal for action at a European level and for a time frame. The member states are called upon to accord due consideration to the principle of subsidiarity in introducing suitable validation regulations by 2018. This is the first time that a clearly defined time horizon has been put in place for this area of activity.

The following chapter is divided into two parts. Section 1 describes the milestones along the long route leading to the Council Recommendation. Section 2 summarises the most important aspects contained within the Recommendation and outlines the current status of implementation in accordance with the European key documents (“European Inventory”, “European Guidelines”). It also looks at the stakeholders and mechanisms which play a role in management and in the monitoring of implementation.

3.1 Milestones along the route to the Council recommendation (2012)

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been on the EU educational policy agenda for more than two decades. The White paper on “Growth, competitiveness and employment”⁶ (1993) categorises “lifelong education and training” as an action area of high priority (p. 120):

“All measures must therefore necessarily be based on the concept of developing, generalizing and systematizing lifelong learning and continuing training. This means that education and training systems must be reworked in order to take account of the need which is already growing and is set to grow even more in the future for the permanent recomposition and redevelopment of knowledge and know-how. The establishment of more flexible and more open systems of training and the development of individuals’ ability to adapt will become increasingly important, both for businesses, so that they can make better use of the technological innovations they develop or acquire, and for individuals, a considerable proportion of whom may well have to change their line of work four or five times during their lives.”

⁵ [eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222(01))

⁶ White Paper: Growth, competitiveness, employment. The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century. Available online at: europa.eu/documentation/official-docs/white-papers/pdf/growth_wp_com_93_700_parts_a_b.pdf

In the White Paper “Teaching and Learning. Towards the learning society”,⁷ which appeared two years later in 1995, the talk is already of the validation of skills obtained and of a personal “skills card” (p. 19):

“In the learning society individuals must be able to have their basic, technical and occupational skills validated, how they were acquired. (...) A personal skills card providing a record of skills and knowledge accredited in this way should be available to all those who want one.”

These two White Papers established the foundations for the European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996). Initially, the educational policy goals formulated remained abstract, such as in the 2000 “Memorandum on lifelong learning”: *“to enhance the status of education by improving the ways in which learning participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated, particularly non-formal and informal learning”*. In the subsequent years, such objectives were further specified and operationalised and supplemented by a series of support measures.

In order to ensure comparability of the approaches and procedures, “Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning”⁸ were adopted in 2004, the aim being that these should serve as a framework for future activities of the member states. The Communication of the Commission to the Council “Adult learning: It is never too late to learn”⁹ (2006) finally calls upon member states to develop systems for the validation of learning outcomes. Particular significance is accorded in this regard to closer involvement of all relevant stakeholders. The “Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning”¹⁰ (2011) lends further impetus to this demand. Member states are urged to set up fully functioning systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The “European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning”¹¹ (2009), which were presented by Cedefop, represented an attempt to support the member states in the implementation of the objectives formulated. Ongoing monitoring of implementation via the “European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning”¹² (previous editions: 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014) have enabled a broad range of different approaches in Europe to be highlighted.

Parallel to this, so-called transparency instruments were created to support communication between the education systems. These include the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which in conjunction with national qualifications frameworks (NQF’s) aims to improve the legibility of educational certificates across Europe, the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), a corresponding system for institutes of higher education in the form of the

7 WHITE PAPER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING TEACHING AND LEARNING TOWARDS THE LEARNING SOCIETY. Available online at: europa.eu/documents/comm/white_papers/pdf/com95_590_en.pdf

8 www2.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/principles/validation2004_en.pdf

9 eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52006DC0614&from=EN

10 eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:372:0001:0006:en:PDF

11 www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4054_en.pdf

12 www.cedefop.europa.eu/de/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and, last but not least, the EUROPASS documents. Participation in these initiatives by the member states implies orientation towards common European standards. It makes vocational qualifications easier to compare by clarifying the associated professional competences. Finally, the European Quality Reference Framework (EQAVET) assists the countries in identifying options for improvement. The objective of better recognition of non-formal and informal learning is also emphasised in each case.

More than 10 years after the initiation of the Copenhagen Process¹³ to strengthen European co-operation in vocational training, within the scope of which the instruments stated above were developed, many positive developments can be identified, even if there is a long way to go before the objectives formulated in 2002 are achieved. Although the main initial focus was on greater transparency, a general improvement in quality and more mobility in the European education systems, the Bruges Communiqué (2010)¹⁴ formulated the vision of making education and continuing training more attractive, more easily accessible to all citizens and more flexible. Expansion of the validation of informal and non-formal learning was considered to be an important building block in this regard.

The Council Recommendation of December 2012 establishes a clear correlation between availability of recognition procedures on the one hand and increasing the employability and learning motivation of persons with low levels of formal qualifications on the other. In the wake of the economic and financial crisis, this topic is also becoming relevant for labour market policy reasons. The “Council Recommendation on establishing a youth guarantee”¹⁵ (2013) once more explicitly calls upon the labour market policy stakeholders in the member states to implement the Council Recommendation on validation and initiate relevant measures to promote integration into the labour market.

The European Ministers of Education confirmed this once more via the Riga Conclusions¹⁶ of June 2015 and stressed the necessity of structural establishment of validation in the education systems:

“Enhance access to VET and qualifications for all through more flexible and permeable systems, notably by offering efficient and integrated guidance services and making available validation of non-formal and informal learning.”

13 ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/copenhagen-declaration_en.pdf

14 ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom_en.pdf

15 eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2013:120:0001:0006:en:PDF

16 ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/2015-riga-conclusions_en.pdf

3.2 The Recommendation of the Council of the European Union and the status of implementation

Implementation of the Council Recommendation of 2012

The “Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning” of December 2012 forms the basis for extensive networking between member states, educational institutions, social partners and other important stakeholders on the development of procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The aim is for national procedures to be instigated by 2018 at the latest making visible of learning outcomes from non-formal and informal contexts, such as work, leisure time, sport and voluntary activities.

The Recommendation states four elements for the validation of learning outcomes.

- Identification
- Documentation
- Assessment
- Certification in the form of a qualification (or partial qualification)

Whereas the first two elements tend to be of a formative character,¹⁷ the stages of assessment and certification are largely summative in nature and require the involvement of external stakeholders.

The Recommendation provides a number of important indications for implementation.

- **Focus on the individual:** in the development of national validation strategies, the aim was for the main focus to be on individuals (citizens, learners, low-skilled workers, job seekers). The objective is to make knowledge, skills and competences visible and allow the acquisition of a full or partial qualification. The question of a legal right to validation also requires clarification.
- **Information, guidance and orientation:** during the process of introduction of a validation system, consideration needs to be accorded to the establishment of accompanying support structures. These include information and guidance agencies for specific target groups. Where no central guidance institution is installed, existing educational, social and employment-related guidance services and actors need to be connected and/or coordinated.
- **Involvement of relevant stakeholders:** in most countries, there is no central body which is responsible for validation. Because, however, the validation process is extremely complex, relevant stakeholders need to be involved in the process of implementation at an early stage.

¹⁷ So-called “pass instruments” can be used for the identification and documentation of learning outcomes and largely be completed independently by learners, citizens and job seekers (e.g. Europass, Youthpass, or the German „ProfilPASS“).

- **Involvement of companies:** companies should be provided with targeted support for the identification and documentation of the learning outcomes of employees. Small and medium-sized enterprises in particular may benefit from reliable competence assessment standards. For this reason, validation in the workplace plays a major role.
- **Involvement of labour administration bodies:** low-skilled workers are particularly dependent on validation procedures. Access to the labour market may be facilitated by better recognition of qualifications. Labour administration bodies or other employment support institutions can use so-called “skills audits” to record, evaluate and certify existing knowledge, skills and competences. Comparable documentation standards have a major part to play in this regard.
- **Validation and qualifications frameworks:** all EU member states are currently developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Most are designed in a way that extends across educational areas and encompass all types of qualification. For this reason, the validation strategy should be integrated into the development and implementation of a NQF.
- **Quality assurance:** transparent quality assurance procedures that cover all phases of the validation process need to be implemented. Professionals who are involved with validation (e.g. within the scope of the provision of guidance to specific target groups or the documentation and evaluation of learning outcomes) should be given tailored training or undergo preparation for the activities they perform.

Stakeholders and implementation processes

The open coordination method (OCM)¹⁸ is normally used as the instrument for the development of a coherent strategy for education and training in Europe. This was introduced in the Lisbon Conclusions¹⁹ (2000) and has been deployed for VET policies within the scope of the Copenhagen Process (from 2002). The purpose of the OCM is to agree political strategies and implement recommendations on a voluntary basis. It comes into effect in policy areas in which the EU has no regulatory competence in accordance with the subsidiarity principle but where there is an interest in European comparability and convergence. Fields in which this applies include education, culture and research. The EU has, for example, no authority to issue stipulations regarding the qualification contents or structuring of (initial) training systems. In such cases, assimilation takes place, if at all, via the OCM.²⁰

18 Also referred to as open method of coordination (OMC).

19 www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm

20 For a debate on the benefits and drawbacks of the open coordination method, cf. Preunkert, J. (2009): Chancen für ein soziales Europa? Die Offene Methode der Koordinierung als neue Regulierungsform [Chances for a social Europe? The open method of coordination as a new regulatory form], Wiesbaden. Büchs, Milena: New Governance in European Social Policy. The Open Method of Coordination. Basingstoke, New York 2007.

The intention is that management, monitoring and support of the implementation will be incumbent on the “European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG)”, a European Commission panel of experts established in the wake of the development and implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The EQF AG is made up of representatives from member states, candidate countries, social partners and civil society organisations such as the Lifelong Learning Platform. Implementation takes place via the involvement of relevant stakeholders in working groups at a national level and feedback of the results of this opinion-forming process to the European level.

Activities are supported via ongoing monitoring of the implementation. This includes the following elements.

- Continuation of the “European Inventory on Validation” (Cedefop)
- Reports on the link between national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and the validation strategies (on a two-year cycle, Cedefop)
- Reports and presentations by the member states on the status of the implementation of the Recommendation, including within the scope of “peer learning activities” (a national roadmap is expected by 2018)
- Adaptation of the “European guidelines” (Cedefop) to the Council Recommendation of 2012

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop)

The “European guidelines”²¹ intended to provide support to member states in the implementation of a validation strategy were first published in 2009 and have initially exerted their main effect on the execution of transnational project-based activities (such as within the the EU Lifelong Learning Programme). A revision of the guidelines has been agreed in connection with the Council Recommendation. The plan is for the new version of the guidelines to be available in December 2015.

The revised guidelines²² address the most important points contained within the Council Recommendation, provide specific indications for implementation and describe practical examples. One main focus is on the description of specific validation instruments and methods which may be deployed within the scope of validation practice. The guidelines present formative and summative approaches towards the evaluation of learning outcomes in the form of various test and examination procedures, dialogue and communication oriented and descriptive methods, methods of observation and simulation. They also outline instruments for the documentation and representation of learning outcomes such as work samples, curricula vitae and portfolios. In addition to this, key questions are formulated regarding main fields of activity within validation practice.

²¹ www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4054

²² European Commission/Cedefop: European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. Draft version April 2015

1. *Four stages of validation* – clear definition of the four stages of “identification, documentation, assessment and certification of learning outcomes”, appropriate communication vis-à-vis those seeking validation, provision of support.
2. *The individual at the centre of the validation process* – treating the rights and obligations of participants with care.
3. *Information, guidance and counselling* – appropriate establishment in the system (e.g. centralised versus decentralised provision) and quality.
4. *Coordination of stakeholders* – clarification of the relationship between various forms of validation provision and those responsible, cooperation within an integrated system.
5. *National qualifications frameworks* – linking of validation procedures with the NQFs and other transparency instruments, status of validation procedures in the education system.
6. *Standards and learning outcomes* – relationship of standards applied in the formal system and in validation procedures and implications for validation.
7. *Quality assurance* – existence of an integrated quality assurance system, quality development measures.
8. *Validation practitioners* – formal requirements at all stages of the validation process, professionalisation strategies and cooperation within the system as a whole.
9. *Validation in education and training* – relationship with education and training organisations, degree of implementation in areas of education and training, opening up points of access via validation.
10. *Open educational resources* – opportunities for the consideration of learning outcomes achieved in validation procedures.
11. *Validation in enterprises* – Accessibility of methods for competence assessment, availability for a broader scope of employees and benefits of the results outside the enterprise.
12. *Skills audits for the unemployed* – implementation of competence assessments, overall societal cooperation and coordination, particularly between private and public sector stakeholders.
13. *Validation in youth organisations and the voluntary sector* – decision regarding an appropriate validation stage (in accordance with 1.), overall societal cooperation.
14. *Validation tools* – appropriateness for the learning outcomes to be identified, reliability.

This means that the guidelines provide specific indications for stakeholders in countries which are involved in taking steps to implement a comprehensive regional / national validation strategy.

European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop)

Cedefop publishes regular reports on the status of the validation of informal and non-formal learning in the form of the European Inventory. The Inventory describes the status in the member states and draws conclusions for the European context. Reference is made to good practice in Europe in providing the countries with specific recommendations.

In the fifth edition of the Inventory (2014),²³ Cedefop states that there has been a significant increase in educational policy activities for the creation of comprehensive validation systems. Despite inconsistent data, it also believes that some countries in which no validation systems have existed thus far have seen a rise in the demand for such procedures, whilst the situation has stabilised at a certain level in countries with regulated provision such as France and the Netherlands. The impression gained from the last survey in 2010 that low-skilled workers are the main target group of validation provision has also been borne out.

The “European Inventory” (2014) differentiates countries by the status of development that they have achieved in terms of implementing a comprehensive strategy for the establishment of validation structures. In accordance with the conclusions drawn, the following criteria can be identified for a mature and comprehensive strategy.

- There is a link between the validation strategy and the NQF.
- All areas of education and training are taken into account.
- There is an interlinking between validation initiatives in the public, private and voluntary sectors.
- Specific measures for operationalisation are in place.
- There is a quality assurance concept.

23 European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2014): European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014. Final synthesis report. Online: libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2014/87244.pdf

The following table shows the status of development in the countries.

Table 2: Validation strategies in Europe

National (or where relevant regional) strategy for validation	
Comprehensive strategy in place	Strategy in place but some elements missing
FI, FR, ES	CZ, DK, EE, IT, IS, LU, LV, NO, NL, PL, RO
AT, BE-Flanders, CH, CY, DE, EL, LI, LT, MT, PT, SI, SK, TR	BE-Wallonia, BG, HR, HU, IE, SE, UK- E&NI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales
Strategy is in development	No strategy in place

Sources: European Inventory for validation (2014).

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The table shows that Finland, France and Spain have implemented policies for comprehensive validation strategies. In these countries, the validation procedures and relevant support measures are established on a statutory basis. Two further editions of the “European Inventory” are planned to support the implementation of the Council Recommendation, and these are scheduled for publication in 2017 and 2019.

Digression: A phenomenon affecting the whole of the world, not merely Europe

The EU is not the only area in which the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is on the education policy agenda. This is a global topic which is the object of a labour market policy focus by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):

“Recognition provides greater visibility and therefore potential value to the learning outcomes and the competences of people in the labour market. This can make it more efficient and cheaper for workers and employers to match skills to jobs. In turn, this may make it more attractive for workers and employers to invest in on-the-job training, knowing that the outcome of that investment can be recorded and built upon. Such recognition of learning outcomes can also facilitate structural adjustment by enabling competences of displaced workers to be recognised and reapplied in other parts of the labour market.”²⁴

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which has a total of 195 member states, is also looking at the topics of validation and recognition and at the development of national qualifications frameworks. Via the new created ePlatform of the UIL Global Observatory of the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning it provides access to information on RVA in the Member States. Some countries have many years of experience with outcomes-based qualifications frameworks which

²⁴ Werquin, P. (2010): Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning Outcomes, Policies and Practices. p. 8

also take the results of non-formal and informal learning into account, and this is something which can also be used for European developments. The main points of reference here are the “UNESCO Guidelines on the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning”²⁵ (2012) and the country reports and studies drawn up as a result of this initiative.²⁶

Status of implementation and further steps

The Council Recommendation (2012) represents a commitment on the part of the member states to introduce suitable validation procedures by 2018 and a desire to link these with the national qualifications frameworks (NQF's). In order to achieve this goal, a road map has been agreed by the EQF AG²⁷. This states that the member states should begin by identifying all relevant stakeholders and involving these in the implementation process. These include the social partners, the chambers and competent bodies, labour administration agencies, youth organisations, educational institutions and other bodies such as voluntary organisations. A national implementation plan should be drawn up in conjunction with these stakeholders and the general financial conditions outlined. This should be followed by pilot projects for the implementation of validation procedures (e.g. in individual regions, branches or sub-labour markets or aligned towards specific target groups) and the establishment of institutional and human resources capacities. The findings obtained should be used to inform a harmonised quality assurance process supported by monitoring elements. If necessary, legislative steps should be initiated and instruments such as laws, ordinances and agreements should be prepared. The validation procedures should be introduced and relevant communication and information campaigns launched by the end of 2018 at the latest. The activities should be documented in a national report to be presented to the EQF AG. An evaluation report containing recommendations for further implementation should be submitted to the Council of the European Union by the end of 2019.

²⁵ unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002163/216360e.pdf

²⁶ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2015): Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning in UNESCO Member States, Hamburg. Singh, M. (2014): Global Perspectives on Recognising non-formal and Informal Learning. Why Recognition Matters. Cham, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London.

²⁷ This representation is based on Note 18-8 of the EQF AG. Available online at: www.eucis-lll.eu/eucis-lll/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/AG-18-8-Validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning_.doc

A vision for a better world with validation. Two examples

Two occupational biographies from Germany are presented below. These examples are taken from a country which has only just begun to institutionalise the validation of competences acquired by informal means, and they illustrate the range of life situations in which persons with low levels of formal qualification may benefit from the establishment of such procedures.



Kira

2015 ...

Kira is 33 and has two children aged fourteen and nine. She achieved the lower secondary school leaving certificate but has not completed vocational education and training because she was always caring for the children. For many years, she has had a series of casual jobs (for example working as a cleaner in various doctors' surgeries via a temporary employment agency and as an assistant in a care home). She has been inducted into the workplace but has not acquired a recognised vocational qualification. Kira lives in a rural district of East Germany. The nearest large town (85,000 inhabitants) is about one hour away by public transport. There is very little training provision in the local area. At one time, she would have liked to have entered training, but this was not possible because of the long working and travelling times involved and her childcare responsibilities. She is not in possession of any certificates which are utilisable on the labour market.

... and in 2020

INFORMATION

The advisor at the labour administration agency makes Kira aware that she has a legal right to one-off validation by the competent body of the competences she has acquired by informal means. This validation would enable her to obtain a binding certificate recognised on the educational and labour market which she can use to make further progress towards a vocational qualification. The advisor refers her to the competent body. Before her appointment, Kira uses the website the advisor has told her about to find out information on the procedure and the opportunities open to her. She sees that she has the chance to use her validated occupational experience to achieve a regular vocational qualification on a step-by-step basis via second-chance training.

GUIDANCE

At her first appointment with the competent body, the advisor informs Kira about the stages of the procedure and works with her to draw up a strategy that fits in with her current life situation (childcare responsibilities, very few financial resources etc.). Kira invests particular hope in the occupational experience she has gained from being an assistant at the care home. She finds it helpful and motivating that the website and the guidance meeting have created transparency and opened up possible routes to an (initially low-level) qualification and therefore to a qualified job in the care sector. Kira will also attend a four-hour introductory course at the competent body to familiarise herself with the general conditions and the methodological stages of the procedure.

IDENTIFICATION – DOCUMENTATION – ASSESSMENT

Mit Hilfe eines Portfolios, formalisierten Leistungsbestätigungen durch ihren Arbeitgeber und einer Arbeitsbeobachtung werden Kiras Kompetenzen identifiziert und in einem Kompetenzpass dokumentiert. Referenzsystem ist dabei der Wunschberuf Altenpflegehelferin. Kira ist in den Verfahrensschritten nicht auf Mobilität angewiesen: Sie bearbeitet das Portfolio-Instrument zu Hause (mit verbindlicher telefonischer Unterstützung) und die Arbeitsbeobachtung findet in ihrem Betrieb statt. Zudem erhält sie Unterstützung durch ihren Arbeitgeber. Die Bewertung ergibt, dass ihre bisherigen Tätigkeiten eine Anerkennung als gleichwertig zu dem regulären Abschluss nicht zulassen. Mit Hilfe der zuständigen Stelle werden Nachqualifizierungsmodule identifiziert, die für die Vervollständigung des berufsadäquaten Kompetenzprofils notwendig sind. Der Berater stellt für Kira den Kontakt zu einem Bildungsträger her. Das Validierungsverfahren ist für sie kostenlos, die Finanzierung der Nachqualifizierung erfolgt über eine Kombination aus Bildungsgutschein und geringem Eigenanteil.

CERTIFICATION

With the help of a portfolio, formalised confirmations of work performance from her employer and work observation, Kira's competences are identified and documented in a competence pass. The reference system is her preferred occupation of geriatric nursing assistant. During the stages of the procedure, Kira is not dependent on mobility. She processes the portfolio instrument at home (with binding telephone support) and work observation takes place at her company. She also receives support from her employer. The result of the assessment is that her previous activities do not permit recognition as equivalent to the regular qualification. With the help of the competent body, training modules are identified which are necessary for the completion of the competence profile in a way that is adequate to the occupation. The advisor establishes contact to a training provider for Kira. The validation procedure is free of charge to her. Financing of training takes place via a combination of training vouchers and a small self-contribution.

Bastian

2015 ...

Bastian is 29 and lives in a small town in Bavaria. He began his secondary school career at a grammar school, but switched to an intermediate secondary school at the end of year 6. He completed his schooling by obtaining an intermediate secondary school leaving qualification. He then began to train as a nurse, but dropped out after a year. He then went into the IT sector as a lateral entrant and gained three years of occupational experience at a major industrial company, where he was responsible for network management and the coordination of IT services. As a result of redundancies and the outsourcing of IT services, Bastian was initially taken on by an external service provider on the basis of a twelve-month fixed contract of employment. He was not kept on at the end of the contract and became unemployed. Applications for comparable jobs were unsuccessful. In the period of just under four years during which he was in employment, Bastian acquired competence and experience in leading a small team and in the management of network services. Apart from his testimonial, he has no formal evidence of any kind to demonstrate these competences.

... and in 2020



INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

Bastian too has the legal right to seek validation of his competences acquired by informal means at the workplace within the scope of a publicly funded training measure. Participation in the validation procedure is voluntary. In cooperation with the competent body, Bastian begins by obtaining information and guidance from an expert. A voluntary 4-hour introduction is also offered as part of the measure for those who are interested.

IDENTIFICATION – DOCUMENTATION – ASSESSMENT

The procedure stipulates a competence-based test. Bastian is given the opportunity to demonstrate his competences via a work sample prepared in the apprentice workshop of the training provider. Whilst Bastian is processing the task, he explains and gives situative reasons for the approach he is adopting and answers technical questions. Documentation takes place in the form of a competence pass. The results of the competence assessment are evaluated and deemed to be equivalent to the two-year training occupation of “technical assistant for information technology”. Bastian does not incur any costs for the integration of the validation into the training measure of the employment agency.

CERTIFICATION

Once the procedure is concluded, Bastian receives a certification from the competent body. The validation procedure has enabled him to acquire a regular vocational qualification, which closes the formal gap in his competence profile. He now also has a basis for the completion of IT continuing training courses and can continue to develop his (formal) profile.

4. A look at various European countries – transfer impetuses and perspectives

Joint challenges in European educational policy often meet with a wide range of national responses. This is not merely due to the principle of subsidiarity. In education systems which are regulated in highly different ways and which have long traditions, policy solutions need to become embedded. This opens up the opportunity to *learn* from other countries. The obvious approach, therefore, is to study what has already been shown to be feasible in Europe and then to investigate whether solutions which have proved their worth in one place could be transferable to other countries with modifications if required. For this purpose, we have selected eight countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom and Germany) which we judge in some areas already to have achieved success in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning of persons with low levels of formal qualification. In addition to this, reference will also be made to the country study from Switzerland drawn up within the scope of the “2014 European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning”.

The country studies evaluated below are based on the methodological approach adopted by CEDEFOP in its works on this topic, but are limited to a consideration of five core elements relating to fundamental educational policy decisions when developing a validation system. This means that the present guide may be particularly useful to VET stakeholders in countries in which the implementation of a validation strategy has not yet entered the operational stage. It highlights the *benefits* of establishing validation systems and pays particular heed to the problem situation of *persons with low levels of formal qualification*. Whereas the differentiated country analyses contained within the CEDEFOP Inventory focus on the interest of country-related reporting, a conscious decision has been taken here to adopt a comparative approach which encourages transfer of tried and tested methods.

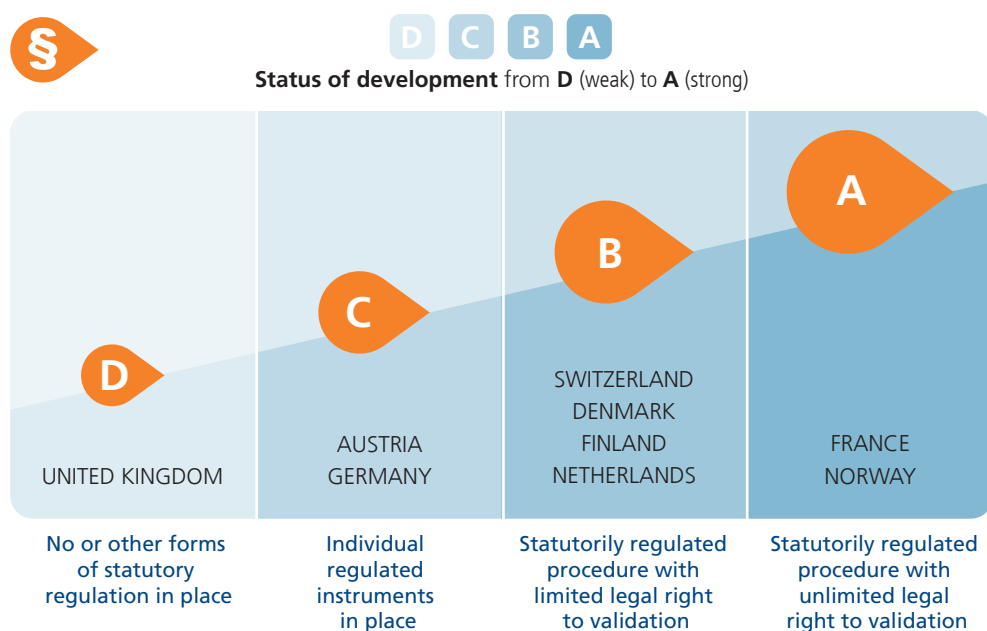
This section presents elements of procedures from Europe which seem *worth transferring* and *transferable*. Conditions are outlined under which these elements may give an impetus and orientation for the structuring of national validation systems. *Worth transferring* refers to procedures which have already proved their value in the respective country by achieving a certain binding status and degree of standardisation and which appear particularly suitable for the validation of the knowledge, skills, and competences of persons with low levels of formal qualification. *Transferable* means that application of the procedures is not based on unalterable prerequisites in the education system or on the labour market of the country concerned and that adaptation to existing national facts and circumstances thus appears possible.

The presentation is structured according to the five core elements of *legal foundations, procedures and instruments, institutionalisation, financing and support*. The outline of the transfer elements and perspectives is in each case illustrated by a brief depiction of the situation in selected European countries. The full country reports can be found at www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe.

§ 4.1 Legal foundations

A comparison of the eight countries from the existing case studies and Switzerland with regard to the degree to which validation is statutorily established, the tasks associated with validation and the scope of the individual right for the conducting of a validation procedure produces the following picture.

Figure 2: Core element “Legal foundations”



Sources: own representation.

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In France and Norway, a comprehensive individual right exists for the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal needs (A). The validation system also covers applicants who wish to have their competences confirmed in the form of a certified portfolio rather than aspiring directly to a formal qualification. Participation in the procedures remains voluntary. Certificates are of the same kind (i.e. they do not differ from certificates obtained via formal education) or of equal value (i.e. they are different but do not have any limitations vis-à-vis certificates acquired in the formal system with regard to usability and labour market acceptance). In Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland, the right to validation forms part of the adult rights of access to or acquisition of a vocational qualification, whereby they may be restrictions in some branches (B). Individual regulations are in place in Germany and Austria (C). In the United Kingdom, there are no legal regulations in place that directly govern the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (D).

Transfer impetuses and perspectives

Looking at Europe makes it clear that opportunities to establish validation procedures and link these with utilisable certificates can mainly be found in countries with an existing legal foundation for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. There is a reciprocal relationship between statutory regulation and the degree of institutionalisation. Legal, transparent and binding regulations are the consequence of the fact that the value of occupational experience and of competences not acquired via formal pathways is recognised and held in esteem by society. They are also a significant impetus for the societal assertion and establishment of the idea of the equivalence of informal learning. The *individual legal right* to the conducting of a validation procedure, which already exists in many areas, regulation of the *tasks associated with validation* (guidance, certification etc.) and the *often broad range of reference* profiles within the formal system to which results of validation are related are all particularly notable features.



Transfer reference France

In France, the "Loi de modernisation sociale" from 2002 opens up a legal basis for the right to validation of informal learning to every person with at least three years' experience in a paid, unpaid or voluntary activity via the procedure of "Validation des acquis de l'expérience" (VAE). This statutory foundation is far-reaching to the extent that it both secures the individual right to participation in a validation procedure in legal terms and governs all further process components associated with validation. It also relates to guidance as well as covering financing and institutional responsibilities. The procedure, which is voluntary, leads to official certification of the same type as initial training and is based on a broad range of reference profiles. All qualifications listed in the National Register of Qualifications ("Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles", RNCP) and other qualifications recognised in individual branches may be acquired via this route.

The individual right to competence assessment procedures ("Bilan de compétences") not leading directly to certification is also enshrined in law. This comprehensive legal situation, the legal right itself and practical implementation, and the formalisation of validation results from various areas (job, employment, voluntary work etc.) are evidence of the fact that non-formal learning, informal learning and occupational experience are accorded a recognised equal status in France.

Transfer reference Switzerland

The Swiss Vocational Training Act (BBG) and the Ordinance on Vocational Education and Training (BBV) allow adults with at least 5 years of occupational experience (at least three of which must be in the occupation in which recognition is sought and at least half of which must be shown to have taken place in Switzerland) to demonstrate and obtain recognition of their occupational competences via a validation dossier (Salini 2014: 11). Statutory regulation is thus in place with regard to the individual legal right to validation, the result of which is a formal entitlement (e.g. shortening of training) or a qualification.

Because of the particular federal nature of Switzerland, development of solutions and modalities for the validation procedures and stipulation of their financing takes place via the cantons. Das SBFI (Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation) recognises the procedures of the cantons following validation. Joint minimum standards (which also act as the test criteria) are stipulated in the SBFI guide. These include statements regarding the tasks of the stakeholders responsible within the individual stages of validation, the sequence and methods of the procedure, guidance, support and quality assurance (ibid. 9).

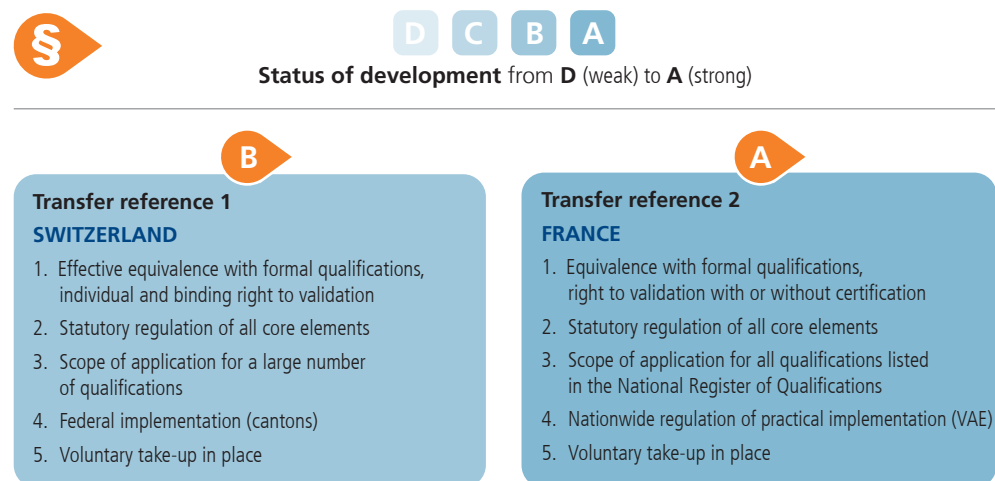
The Swiss Conference of Vocational Education and Training Offices (SBBK) is responsible for overall coordination. Despite close coordination between the cantons, availability and awareness of the procedure continues to vary from canton to canton (ibid. 4). Moreover, the procedure is not yet established for all occupational groups, something which is currently still restricting the range of reference profiles (ibid. 12).



In France and in Switzerland, legal foundations are in place which establish a legal right to validation of non-formal and informal learning and provide statutory governance of the structures which facilitate individual take-up. There are prerequisites contained within specific national characteristics which need to be taken into account when evaluating the transfer impetuses for other countries. In France, vocational education and training is largely managed in a centralised way, whereas in Switzerland consideration of specific features of the cantons plays a significant role. It may be stated that transfer references may be identified both for centrally and federally organised states.

In the case of the legal foundations for validation, the following summary of transfer references may be made.

Figure 3: Core element “Legal foundations” – transfer references



Sources: own representation.

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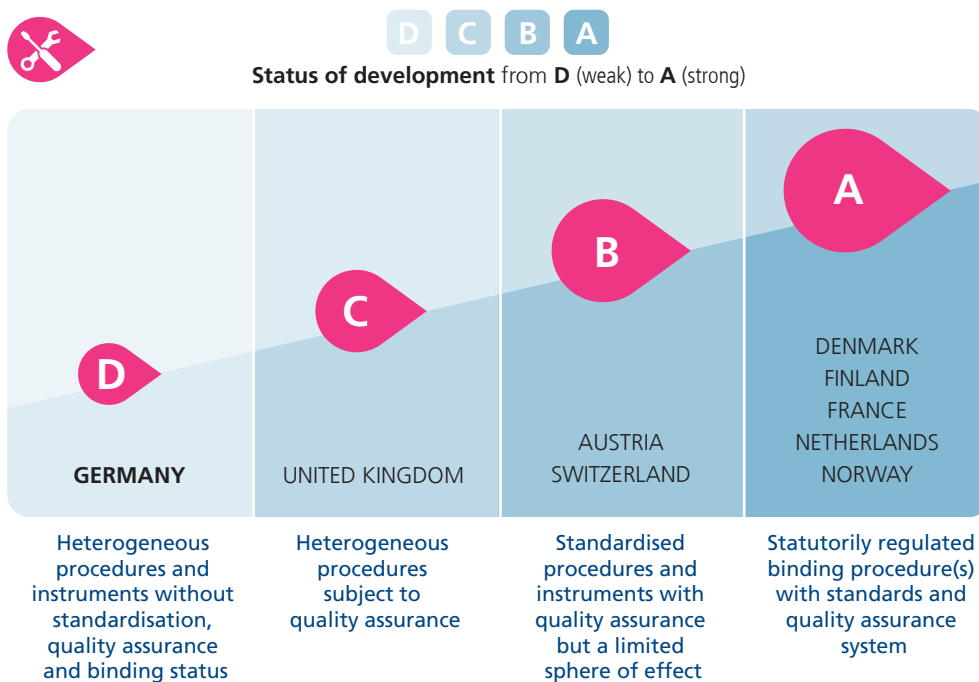


4.2 Procedures and instruments

For the validation of informal learning, procedures are required which are more flexible and more readily individualisable than those used in the formal examination system but which do not fall short of the quality standards established in the latter. The procedures need to be structured in such a way so as to lead to reliable results without demanding too much of the target group. Reference procedures which correspond to this requirement and in respect of which sufficient experience has been gathered are of particular interest.

Current European practice is largely characterised by standardised validation procedures and instruments particularly directed towards workers with low levels of formal qualification with a limited sphere of effect (such as those deployed regionally or for certain occupational groups) (B). Some countries already have elaborated procedures in place which are structured so as to be aligned towards the labour market in many cases (A). (This particularly applies to the Netherlands.) Such procedures facilitate competence assessments with formal qualifications of the same type (Finland, France, Norway) and alternative forms of training. Graded certificates have been established in some countries. These make it easier for groups who are particularly unused to learning to enter training and work (Denmark, Netherlands). In the United Kingdom, heterogene-

Figure 4: Core element "Procedures and instruments"



Sources: own representation.

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ous validation procedures exist which are subject to a stable system of quality assurance within the scope of a qualifications and credit point framework. This secures integration into the formal education system (C). Apart from the external examination, which opens up alternative access to formal testing of initial vocational education and training within the dual system, Germany also has a heterogeneous landscape of procedures and instruments which is not able to secure binding recognition of informal and non-formal learning (D).

Transfer impetuses and perspectives

In order not to lose sight of the needs of workers with low levels of formal qualification in light of the wide range of aspects that generally need to be taken into account in the structuring of validation procedures, the search for transfer opportunities described below will focus on three selected fields.

- *Binding status and usability of results:* procedures which create binding recognition of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means within the sense that they open up access to training courses and/or jobs and employment
- *Individualisation of procedures:* procedures which, compared to conventional forms of examination (text-based or strongly communication-based tests of theory and knowledge), contain alternative methods and are structured in such a way so as to take account of the situative character of informal learning (work-integrated learning)
- *Flexibility and gradation of validation procedures:* procedures which facilitate evidence of competence at varying stages (ideally building upon one another) and which are therefore able to take the resources of the interested parties into account in a flexible manner)

Binding status and usability of results

The more strongly formalised training systems are, the harder they often find it to recognise competences acquired outside state-regulated education and training courses. Nevertheless, the example of the Upper Austrian initiative “Du kannst was!” shows how direct recognition of competences obtained through occupational experience can take place within such a system and also display a direct reference with the certificate standards of the formal training system by providing an apprenticeship qualification.

Transfer reference Austria

A procedure has been developed in Upper Austria which facilitates de facto recognition of competences acquired by informal means for persons with a minimum age of 22. In the initiative “Du kannst was! – recognition of occupationally relevant learning outcomes” (which is still at the project stage), validation candidates go through a six-stage procedure. Competences acquired are *documented* by the candidates (e.g. via references, diplomas, work confirmations and/or descriptions of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means), *evaluated* by the respective competent body (which is also responsible for the issuing of formal qualifications) via such vehicles as an interview or workplace observation, and, if a positive decision is arrived at, certified (Part 1 of the examination). Missing competences are acquired via a *second-chance* procedure involving supplementary training measures and subsequently *tested* (Part 2 of the examination), whereby preparation may take place via vehicles such as courses at vocational school, at providers of non-formal training or through expansion of practical experience at the company. In legal terms, this route to the acquisition of an apprenticeship certificate has its basis in the possibility of completing the final apprenticeship examination in two parts (Austrian Vocational Training Act, BAG, § 23 Paragraph 11). Guidance and support are also obligatory. The number of apprenticeship qualifications gained via this route is still relatively small (72 qualifications since the introduction of the procedure in December 2011).



The approach adopted in the “Du kannst was!” initiative combines accessibility of the validation procedure with a legally reliable basis and the attractive prospect of a recognised vocational qualification, including for persons no longer used to learning. Although the method selected in Austria aims to achieve the same result as, for example, the German external examination, its starting prerequisites are different. The process is individualised, i.e. it builds upon a person’s existing competences. Recognition takes place within the scope of the procedure without any necessity for a further examination, whereas in the case of the external examination in Germany competences acquired by non-formal and informal means are only considered as a condition for admission and are not systematically identified. Categorisation of the examination on the basis of the validation results is not planned. This may be one of the reasons why participation rates of the German external examination are so low.

Individualisation

Practice in Finland and France proves that it is possible to link *alternative forms of competence assessment* with performance standards of the formal system and to end recognition procedures with qualifications of the same type. In many cases, the validation procedures practised in these countries lead to qualifications which are of the same *type* as those in the formal education system.



Transfer reference Finland

In Finland, a standardised procedure called “Personalisation” has been in place since 2007. This gives every candidate the right to an individual training and examination plan (including validation), via which the target qualification can be achieved. Final examinations may involve competence-based tests conducted in the workplace. These may be tailored in a highly individual manner and either be completed in full or in modular form via several stages. The examinations may be omitted entirely if there is sufficient evidence of the competences necessary to obtain the certificate. A de facto recognition of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means thus takes place. Apart from the examination modalities, however, the skills requirements are the same. This means that certificates are of the same type. A high degree of participation has been recorded for the procedure. In 2012, for example, more than 34,000 competence-based qualification certificates were issued. By way of comparison, the number of school-based vocational qualifications acquired by young people during the same year was 36,500.



Transfer reference France

In France, the VAE (“Validation des acquis de l’expérience”) enables persons to obtain a (partial) qualification by demonstrating competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. A partial qualification (i.e. the confirmation of individual learning units) must be completed within five years. Persons wishing to avail themselves of the VAE procedure submit an application to the specialist ministry responsible for the occupation exercised and put together the necessary documentation if a positive decision is made. Examination of the documentation, validation of the competences via tests and an interview with a jury (comprising trainers and teachers) all take place in accredited institutions. The competence assessment process is somewhat different for persons making an application to the Ministry of Labour. Candidates first draw up a document detailing their experience (“Dossier de synthèse de pratique professionnelle”). During the second phase, they are observed in a simulated work situation before taking part in an interview with a jury. Approximately 65,000 people participate in this procedure every year, and around 30,000 fully equivalent qualifications are awarded in this way.

The major challenge facing countries which do not as yet have a legal basis for alternative forms of examination in place is to make it clear to state institutions and to trade and industry what the existing need is. In countries which have already made considerable progress in this regard, such a process has been successfully instigated via the timely involvement of stakeholders from vocational education and training and the world of work. Experiences with interviews, observation and work samples within the familiar environment and portfolio approaches (with the relevant support and guidance) have been positive. Individualised procedures, which stipulate training provision

adapted to the respective need and a broader ensemble of examination forms, are capable of harmonisation with the requirements and performance standards of formal vocational training. This is demonstrated by looking at the situation in countries such as France and Finland. Upper Austria also combines competence assessments with individually tailored continuing training elements.

Flexibility and gradation

For many persons with low levels of formal qualification, the “everything or nothing” logic of the formal system proves to be a crucial hindrance to training. Graded certifications which relate to standards of formal VET and to labour market standards may help. Approaches which make it possible to acquire an individual certificate or several certificates systematically related to one another below the level of a formal training qualification and which enjoy acceptance on the labour market are therefore certainly of interest. Such certification systems have, for example, been established in Denmark and the Netherlands. The certificates attest to results of the validation of competences acquired by informal means and thus create a reference to qualifications within the formal education system.

Both countries adopt a two-stage approach.

Transfer reference Denmark

Two certificates for the validation of competence profiles that include a content reference to formal training courses and qualifications have been established in adult VET in Denmark. The “competence certificate” attests knowledge, skills and competences which correspond with the learning outcomes of defined modules of education and training courses. The “programme certificate” attests knowledge, skills and competences which fully correspond with the learning outcomes of the reference training course. This system of competence and programme certification is recognised by the social partners. It supports the individual planning of training pathways (such as via the issuing of individual modules). In addition to this, the competence certificates can be utilised on the labour market.



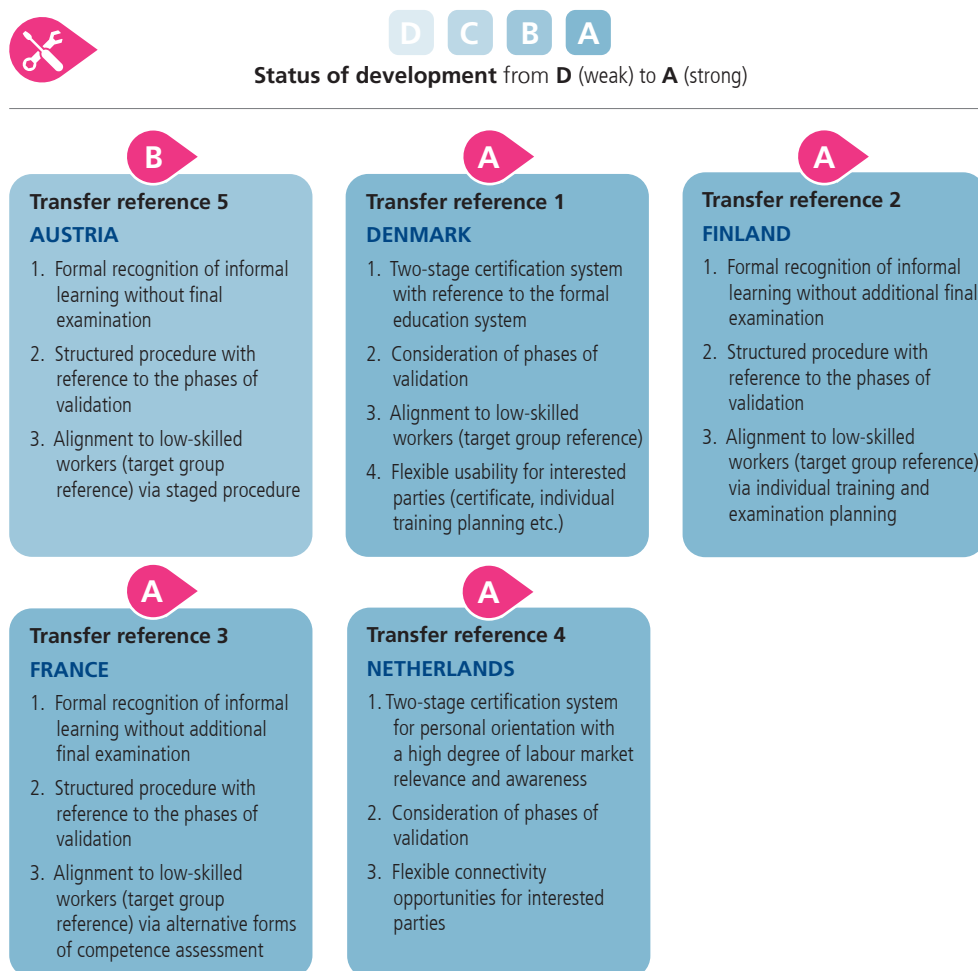


Transfer reference Netherlands

Whereas in Denmark the first stage of the procedure, the “competence certificate”, is also related to parts of the formal education system, the two stages stipulated by the Dutch system have a different alignment. The EVC (“Erkenning verworven competenties”) leads to a validated portfolio (“Ervaringsprofiel”), which constitutes an independent and legally valid document. This is used in the provision of guidance on opportunities for validation or stages of personal development. In the second stage, it leads to an “Ervaringscertificaat”, which has the status of an official certificate and relates to a certain national qualifications standard. Accreditation takes place in the form of a credit transfer, which can be claimed at a qualifying institution or school. Formalised results of validation are thus established at two different levels. The “Ervaringsprofiel” is at the level of orientation of the candidate’s own competence profile (similar to the EUROPASS or the ProfilPASS developed in Germany), whilst the “Ervaringscertificaat” refers to national or sectoral standards and thus in this way to the formal education system. This clear system ensures transparency and acceptance of the procedure in the employment system.

In the case of the procedures and instruments for validation, the following summary of transfer references may be made.

Figure 5: Core element “Procedures and instruments” – transfer references



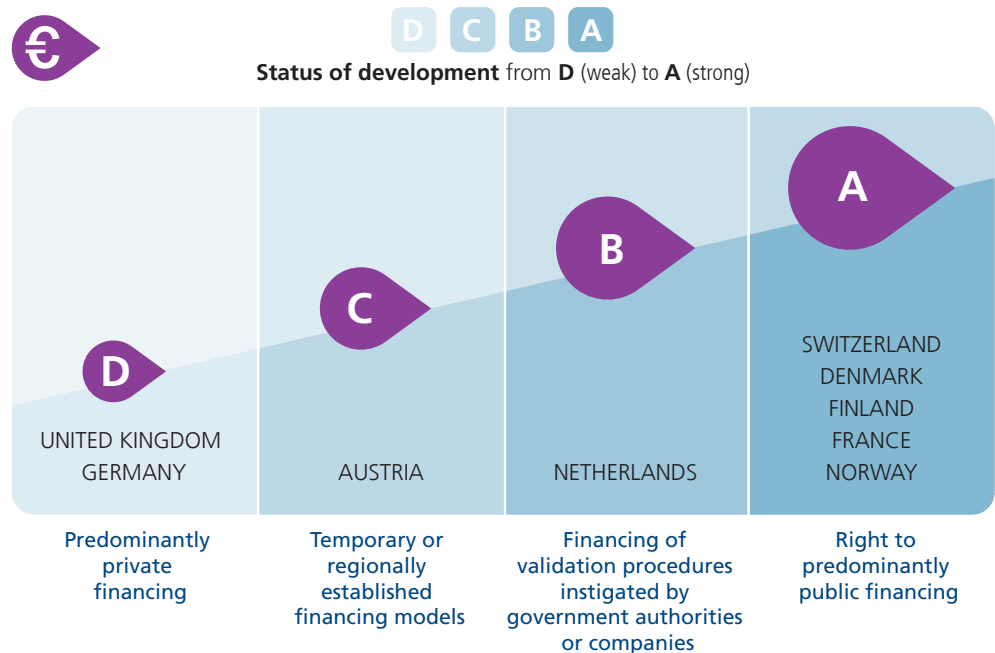
Sources: own representation.

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€ 4.3 Financing

Free education is a long-standing tradition in numerous European countries, and this is something from which systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning also benefit. For this reason, special financing instruments are not always necessary. Nevertheless, the circumstance that only very low levels of fees are incurred for participation in the procedures themselves does not provide any guarantee of widespread use. Preparations, guidance and training can all cause indirect costs to an extent that constitutes a considerable barrier, particularly for candidates with low levels of formal qualification. Alongside predominantly private financing of competence assessments (in particular in the UK and Germany, **D**), there are also examples in Europe of freedom from cost via public financing (**A**) or via financing by companies and government authorities (**B**). Mixed forms characterised by temporary or regionally established financing models also exist (**C**). Most of the countries forming the object of consideration have a financing model in place that is largely public.

Figure 6: Core element "Financing of validation"



Sources: own representation.

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Transfer impetuses and perspectives

A look at the countries in which there is a right to predominantly public financing shows that the possibility of *free take-up* can increase the *attractiveness* of validation procedures, particularly for persons with low levels of formal qualifications. If validations need to be privately funded, this constitutes a disadvantage for participants compared to the users of formal educational pathways which are publicly financed or associated with a training allowance.

There are also already examples in Europe of financing models which permit free take-up of validation procedures or *appropriate gradation* of costs incurred. The main aspect which should be emphasised is that a regulated right to financing is in place in many cases for low-skilled unemployed persons or workers.

Transfer reference Finland

In Finland, there are laws in place which govern the possibility of free take-up of validation and of examination preparation courses for validation candidates. Costs incurred are covered by the Ministry of Education and Culture (for validation candidates who are in work) and the Ministry of Labour (for unemployed persons). In individual cases, validation candidates are required to make a contribution, such as if they are working. Candidates may also incur modest fixed costs under certain circumstances. Since 2012, all validation candidates in Finland have been required to pay a sum of €58 towards the costs of the procedure regardless of their employment status. If an applicant is in employment, employers may also finance training modules.



Transfer reference Switzerland

In Switzerland, the guidelines of the Federal Government state that all candidates who have at least five years of occupational experience but are unable to demonstrate a vocational qualification have a right to full assumption of costs (except any additional or material costs incurred) by the cantons. This includes the costs of the procedure itself, costs of guidance and costs of any support training that may be required (Salini 2014: 28). The final decision as to whether costs will be assumed and to what amount is taken by the cantons. Currently, however, almost all cantons comply with the recommendation of the Federal Government. The differing legislation of the cantons means that regulations vary in terms of detail.





Transfer references France and Netherlands

Most countries also stipulate participation by companies in the validation of competences. The French Continuing Training Act, for example, regulates the financing of validation via continuing training funds and the possibility of release from work in the form of educational leave. (In legal terms, the VAE validation process is allocated to continuing vocational training.

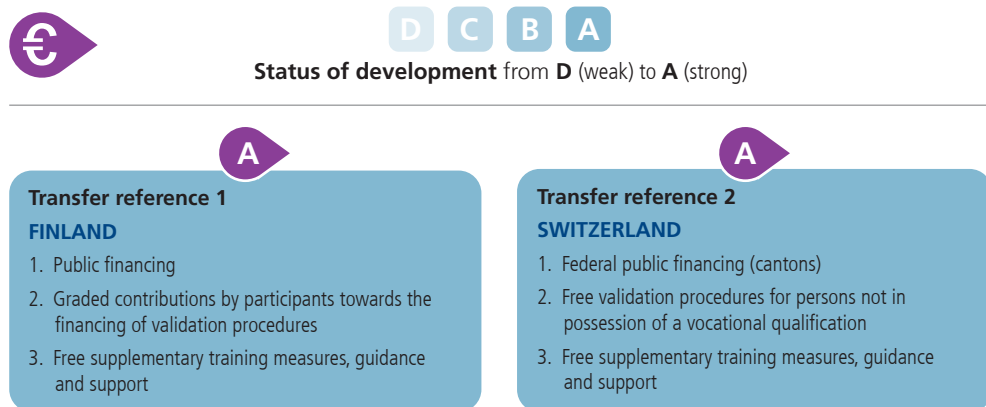
Various forms of financing exist in the Netherlands. Because EVC ("Erkennen verworven competenties") is a commercial process, implementation providers may not access public funds. Nevertheless, continuing training funds are in place for companies with fewer than 500 employees. These are mostly sectorally organised and are supported by public funding in some cases. Companies or individual persons using the validation process may also set costs off against tax.

If a financing system has not yet been created, the legal equalisation of validation with continuing training in accordance with the French model may be helpful. Against the background of the European references, the following options can also be delineated.

- *Linking of financing of validation with existing instruments:* financing of validation is integrated into overarching programmes in some cases. At a national level, instruments already deployed in other contexts, such as training vouchers, are used for validation.
- *Flexibility of the financing models:* in federally structured states, central programmes may be supplemented by decentralised instruments and funding opportunities. This may increase flexibility vis-à-vis the specific life and work situations of the potential candidates.
- *Graded cost participation:* a graded participation procedure may secure appropriate take-up on the part of those interested in seeking validation. Participants not in receipt of an income are not required to pay anything except a fixed-rate administration fee. The contributions of those in employment are assessed on the basis of the amount of their income. Contributions can also be linked with the success of the procedure in order to cover the direct costs of the competent bodies by providing retrospective financing.
- *Contribution by the companies:* Companies contribute to the financing of validations in the Netherlands and in France. A statutory regulation in line with the French model, which stipulates the release of employees from work in the form of educational leave, would also be a possible point of discussion for other countries. If validation procedures are, for example, explicitly requested and supported by the company, they could be indirectly subsidised in accordance with the Dutch example via continuing training funds and programmes of branch associations.

In the case of the financing models, the following summary of transfer references may be made.

Figure 7: Core element “Financing of validation” – transfer references



Sources: own representation.

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4.4 Institutionalisation

The issues of whether validation procedures are firmly and sustainably established within the systems, of which organisation or institution is responsible and of what degree of binding status the procedures exhibit are all crucial aspects. Is legal security in place? Is there ongoing networking between state and private sector stakeholders? Is validation also accepted societally, i.e. beyond academic research and policy debate?

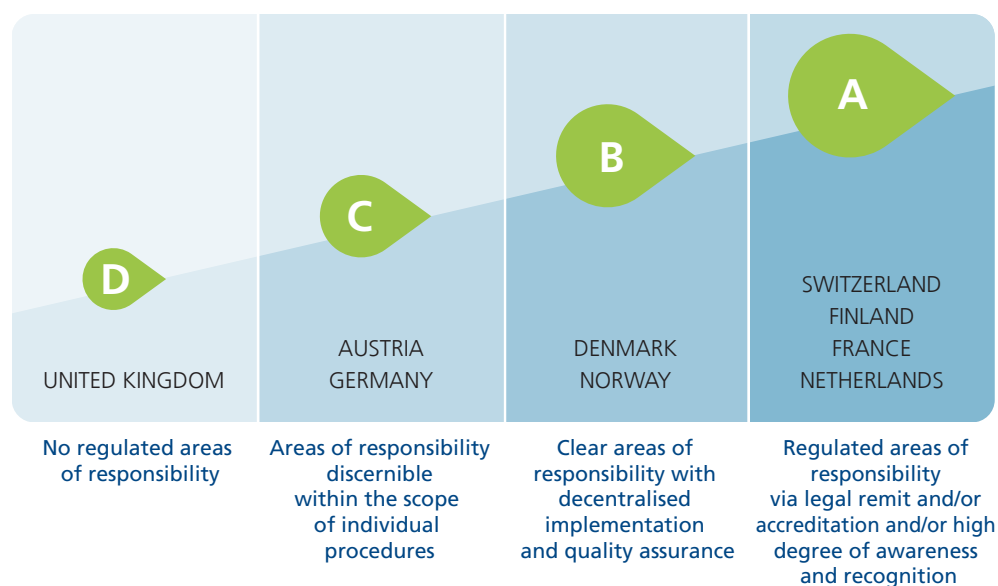
Measured against these aspects, institutionalisation of validation in Europe has made varying degrees of progress. Some countries investigated exhibit clearly regulated areas of responsibility with decentralised implementation via training providers or regional authorities (B). In the best case scenario, the equivalence of validation certification results and formal certifications is secured by the responsibility of regulatory institutions within the education system to deliver a high level of awareness and recognition (A). Although in Austria and Germany areas of responsibility are regulated within the scope of individual procedures, there is a lack of the necessary degree of awareness and recognition (C). In the United Kingdom, recognition of learning outcomes is subject to a qualifications and credit transfer framework. Implementation, however, takes place via a multitude of vocational education and training institutions, and this leads to a lack of transparency (D).

Figure 8: Core element “Institutionalisation”



D C B A

Status of development from D (weak) to A (strong)



Sources: own representation.

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Transfer impetuses and perspectives

Some European states already have *clearly regulated areas of responsibility*, via which the institutional establishment and awareness of validation procedures are created. Awareness and acceptance of the validation procedures and their results in trade and industry and on the labour market are created by the *integration of stakeholders*, such as state VET actors (government offices etc.) and representatives of companies or associations, branches etc. (for example via the organisations involved in the world of work in Switzerland).

Transfer reference Switzerland

The validation of educational achievements in Switzerland is a cooperative task in which representatives of the branches and sectors, Federal Government and cantons are all involved, each with clearly regulated areas of responsibility. So-called “National Organisations of the World of Work” (OdA), which mostly comprise former employers’ associations, draw up skills profiles and pass rules for the individual occupations. Validation cannot take place until both documents have been developed for an occupation. The OdA experts (which are also responsible for assessment in regulated training) also assess applicants and their dossiers (Salini 2014: 32). As soon as the skills profile and pass rules have been approved by the Federal Government, represented by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SBFI), responsibility passes to the cantons. This area of responsibility involves the establishment of a validation procedure (including adaptation to canton legislation) and a so-called validation organ. The latter acts as the regional contact partner for all matters regarding the validation of learning achievements and is also responsible for the examination of the dossier.

Despite close coordination, there are currently still acceptance problems on the labour market. Qualifications acquired via validation are considered to be “second rate”. To this extent, true equivalence is not in place.



Transfer reference Norway

Although the Norwegian system is characterised by the dominance of public bodies, implementation in the 19 administrative districts takes place in networks and in conjunction with educational institutions. There are clear areas of institutional responsibility at the national level via the commissioning of two institutions to carry out and provide overarching coordination of the validation procedures under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Research. “VOX” (Norwegian Institute of Adult Education) is responsible for the coordination of the validation approaches at various levels, whilst the “Directorate of Education” takes charge of management and development of aspects such as vocational education and training. Transparency and quality assurance in accordance with uniform standards are thus ensured.

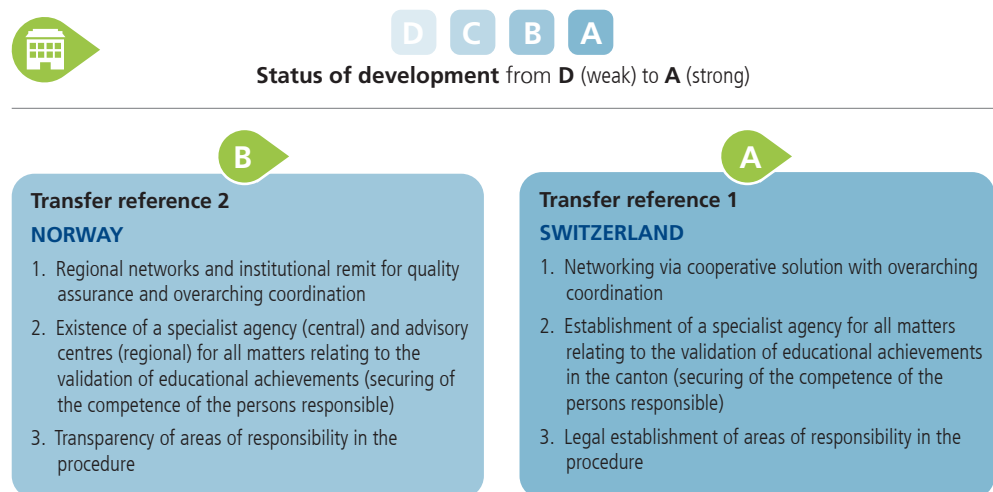


A legally binding *definition of area of responsibility and the integration of VET stakeholders* are aspects which are critical to the institutionalisation of validation procedures and make a major contribution to their awareness and acceptance.

The involvement of professional and branch associations can increase the acceptance of validation results by companies as “host” organisations and thus raise the motivation of low-skilled employees to enter into a validation procedure. Existing committees, councils and panels established within the field of formal vocational education and training should be used for the networking of state and private sector stakeholders.

The following summary of transfer references may be made.

Figure 9: Core element “Institutionalisation” – transfer references



Sources: own representation.

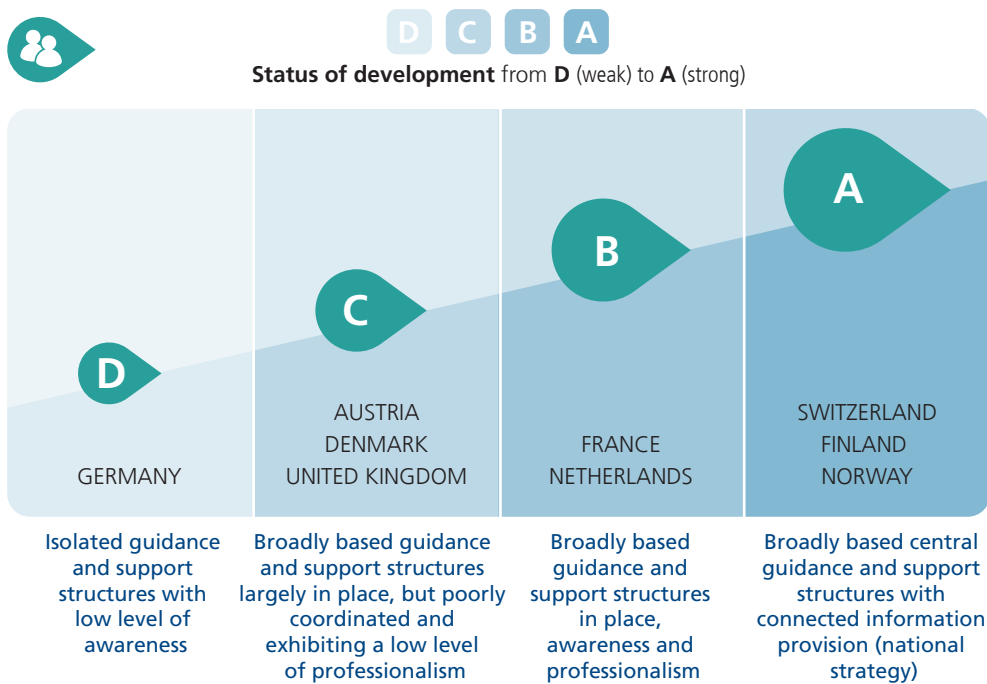
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4.5 Support

In order to provide low-skilled workers with the opportunity to seek guidance on their further occupational development and prospects, low-threshold access to support structures is required. This includes information and guidance provision with universal coverage which is easy to locate (and is available electronically and at a local level).

This requirement is currently being met to highly varying extents in Europe. In Germany, the relevant provision is thin on the ground and awareness is low (**D**). In other countries, guidance and support structures are in place but there is a lack of coordination and professionalism (**C**). Guidance tasks can be successfully performed by guidance and support bodies affiliated to training providers (**B**) or by central provider-independent contact points (**A**). In the case of the former, however, neutrality of guidance needs to be secured in case any vested economic interests are at play.

Figure 10: Core element “Support structures”



Sources: own representation.

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Transfer impetuses and perspectives

Some countries already have a broad range of sources of information which are available nationwide at a local level and in electronic form and are aligned towards the relevant target group. They offer orientation and guidance prior to the commencement of validation and give support across all phases of the process. In some cases, advisors have undergone training in special courses (*professionalisation*).



Transfer reference Switzerland

In Switzerland, guidance and support provision for validation is largely available nationwide. This is particularly secured by so-called entry portals. These are advisory bodies which offer services such as general information on the procedure and other training pathways (regular or shortened training, direct admission to a final examination), specific information on individual reference occupations, entrance requirements, financing and support in preparing the dossier necessary for the validation process (Salini 2014: 31). Guidance on individual aspects or throughout the whole of the procedure may be sought from trained careers advisors or experts from the offices of the cantons. Each canton decides on the structure and form of its guidance provision (group and individual services, online services in some cases). The Swiss Conference of Vocational Education and Training Offices (SBBK) has issued a guide which sets out a number of mandatory stipulations such as the central location of the entry portal and qualification of the guidance staff (ibid. 31). There is also supplementary provision in the form of web-based services for potential validation candidates and the specialist public (ibid. 30).

Transfer reference Finland

In Finland, the duty to establish guidance and support provision and make such provision available is incumbent on the providers of validation and supplementary training. Each adult education institute or vocational school offering validation relating to a qualification is required to act in accordance with the national strategy in recording in writing the form of guidance provided (group and individual advice, online service), the necessary resources and the competences and qualifications of advisory staff (advisors must have completed teacher training and provide evidence of additional certificates stipulated) and have this written record assessed by the Qualifications and Examinations Board. Registration as a validation agency is not issued until these requirements have been fulfilled. Nevertheless, according to the Finnish case study, guidance continues to be directed towards the acquisition of a formal qualification rather than being aimed at individual occupational and career planning.

The labour offices offer information and guidance on opportunities for validation to the unemployed.

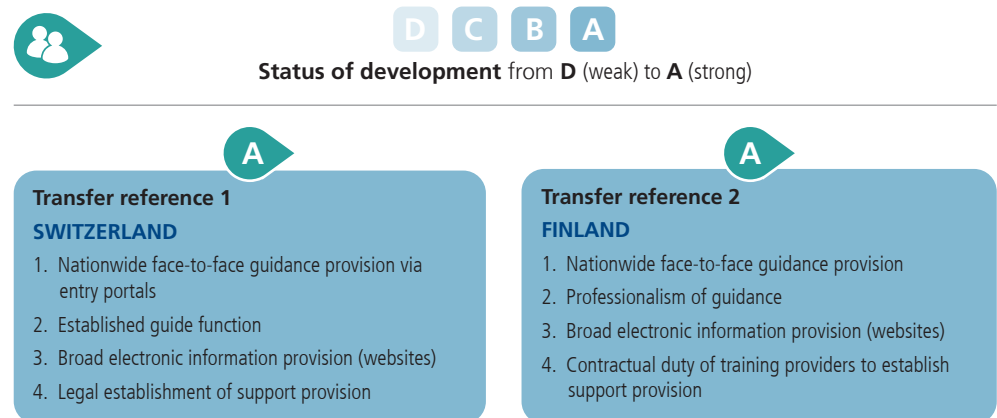
A diverse range of electronic information provision is in place (websites and interactive services such as chats with experts) to provide information on qualifications and validation procedures.



Wide-ranging regional and local guidance provision and networks may lead to a lack of clarity with regard to the support structures available, both for interested parties and for the organisations involved. The best kinds of advisory bodies are institutions which firstly have an established nationwide presence both at a local and regional level, which secondly are able to offer guidance expertise and which thirdly are already offering advice on an ongoing basis. Fourthly, networking of the advisory agencies with other advisory institutions and relevant organisations is also important. The latter include migrant advisory bodies, which could provide important referral guidance in this regard, or training providers, which make appropriate continuing training courses available. Awareness and acceptance of validation opportunities could be significantly enhanced by such a network. Interactive web-based information such as the provision on offer in Switzerland and France is also useful. Public labour administration bodies can also fulfil an important function by acting within the scope of their statutory remit to illustrate opportunities for validation and continuing training to low-skilled workers who are unemployed or threatened with unemployment and by providing financial support for participation.

The following transfer references can be identified in the area of support structures.

Figure 11: Core element “Support structures” – transfer references



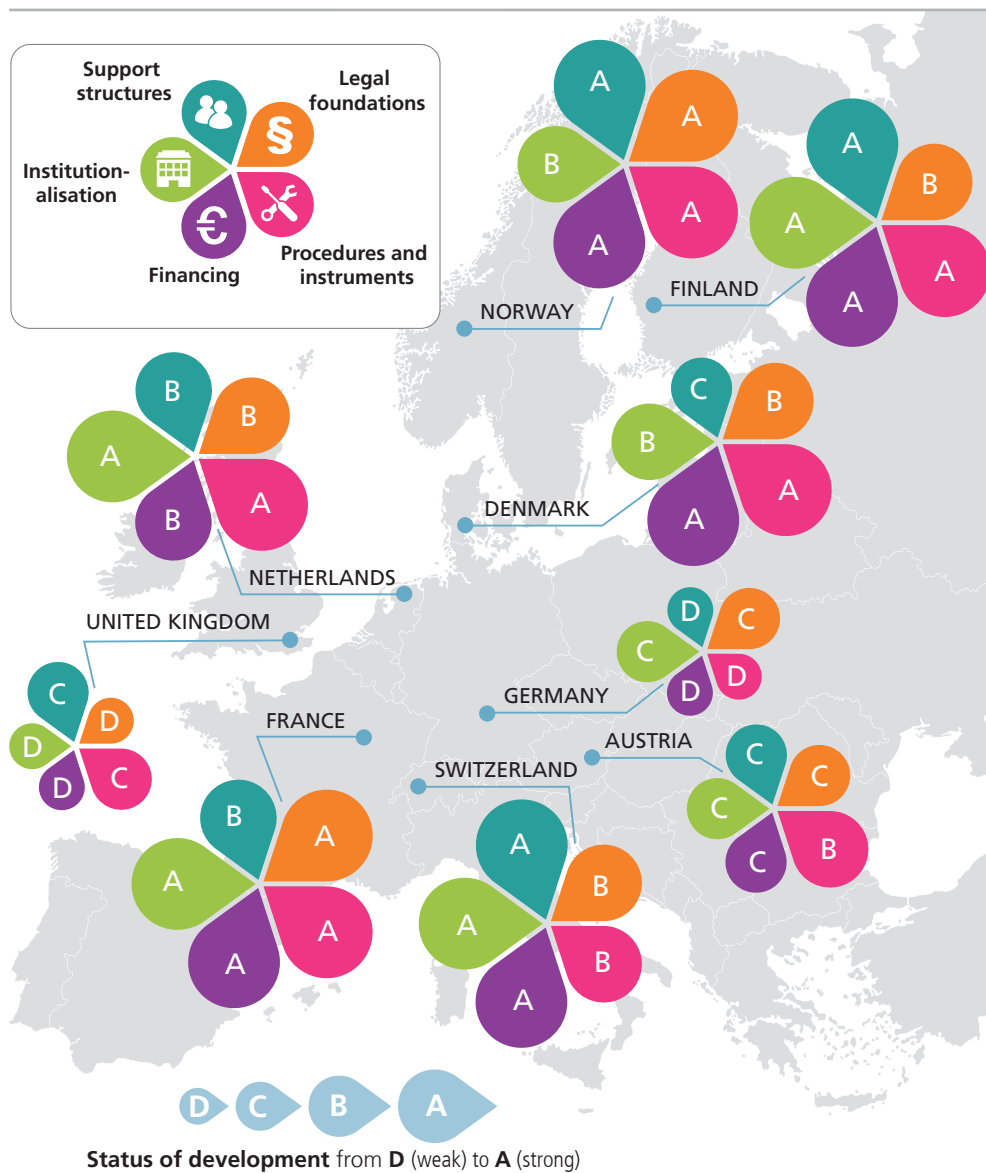
Sources: own representation.

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4.6 Country summary

The overview of the countries forming the object of investigation shows a comparison of the status of development of the various core elements in accordance with the quality criteria from D (weak) to A (strong).

Figure 12: European comparison



Sources: own representation.

5. Recommendations

It is certainly not the case that there has been any lack of attention to issues regarding validation over the past few decades. Some countries have actually established functioning validation systems as the present brochure shows. In other countries, however, a multitude of programmes and projects has tended to lead to declarations of intent rather than to VET policy implementation. It has frequently been the case that communities of project stakeholders have come into being that do not have effective reference to the institutions regulating vocational education and training. These countries cannot be permitted simply to deliver “more of the same” in the form of new temporary programmes and non-binding projects. If regulations for the validation of vocational competences acquired by non-formal and informal means are to be created by 2018, in line with the European Council Recommendation, *qualitative* educational policy progress will need to be made.

The urgency of such initiatives is underlined by individual and societal problem situations, demographic requirements and the personal wishes for development expressed by persons with low levels of formal qualification. The necessity of increasingly integrating large populations of refugees into society and the labour market also indicates the importance of implementing validation procedures which are suitable for identifying individual competences in a reliable manner. The challenge lies in *supplementing* the main education systems by adding such procedures whilst maintaining the standards of the former.

5.1 On the character and use of the study

“The shift to learning outcomes” (CEDEFOP 2009b) reacts to problem situations which present themselves in the same way (at least) across Europe. VET policies are also taking place under national responsibility and within the context of national traditions. In terms of analysis and policy guidance therefore, the recommendation is for generic approaches which describe in general terms the requirements which arise in areas such as within the context of validation procedures but which are also sufficiently open to various problem solutions at a national level. The “European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning” (CEDEFOP 2009a) meet this objective. Although the country studies evaluated here follow their methodological approach, complexity is reduced by focusing on five core elements. In conjunction with the quality criteria defined in each case, these have proved their worth in terms of identifying areas where action is needed and in the alignment of possible solutions. Taking specific national characteristics into account, this operationalising grid can represent a valuable medium-term tool both for the theoretical analysis of the status quo and for the development of recommendations.

A functioning system for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning will therefore need to contain a number of essential components which ensure its usability and accuracy and promote awareness and acceptance on the part of the target group to which it is addressed. The focus needs

to be on transparent *legal foundations*, on *procedures and instruments* which produce quality and relate to the target group, on *financing provision* which opens up points of access to disadvantaged target groups in particular, on *institutionalisation*, not the least of the functions of which is to secure acceptance and recognition of the learning outcomes identified and on *guidance and support* for those aspiring to validation.

The grid proposed here is intended as an analytical tool for policy guidance in the field of the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means. It supports the analysis of existing national validation practices with the aim of identifying good practice and deriving opportunities for transfer to other European states. Educational stakeholders and education and training policy are recommended to undertake the following steps to draw up a strategy for the (ongoing) development of a national validation system.

1. *The country's own validation system is analysed.* It is described on the basis of five core elements. The status achieved is evaluated in accordance with a four-level scale so that development goals can be defined.
2. *During this process, the general framework conditions governing the vocational education and training system are taken into account.* These particularly include the following.
 - *Degree of formalisation of VET:* How and at which level of state activity has vocational education and training been established within the legal system? What is the consequence of this for the regulation of validations? Should these primarily secure a transparent relationship to existing VET standards or does the focus need to be more on individual competence assessments (in systems with a low level of regulation)? What are the respective consequences for the appropriate targeting of the procedures and the transparency of the validation system?
 - *Status of use of competence assessment and transparency instruments:* With which procedures already deployed in sub-areas of the education system, at non-legislative or regional level etc., can connections be made? What role is played by the NQF, credit systems and other transparency instruments in national practices? What role can these play within a coherent validation strategy?
 - *Competence orientation of formal vocational education and training:* To what degree are vocational education and training courses in the formal system already constructed in a learning-outcomes oriented manner, i.e. can a link be made with the description of learning outcomes and competence-oriented examination processes when validations are performed?
 - *Acceptance:* Which stakeholders perceive opportunities and which mainly see the risks of validation (e.g. hollowing out of standards, lack of clarity, high use of resources)? What are the implications of this for the development of a national validation concept?

3. Appropriate transfer references are selected, i.e. there is an identification of countries which are characterised by exhibiting sufficient proximity to the country's own VET system and by displaying more advanced validation practice. If the country examples presented here do not appear to be transferable because there is insufficient proximity to the country's own vocational education and training system, the empirical basis is broadened by considering further country examples which may serve as transfer references.
4. Transfer approaches are drawn up. During this process, consideration is accorded to the following aspects on the basis of the analyses previously carried out.
 - Which deficits were to be rectified in establishing the validation system in the reference country or countries and which deficits was it actually possible to rectify?
 - Which specific measures were instigated (establishment of legal provision, creation of organisational structures, provision of resources etc.)?
 - Which hurdles needed to be overcome in this regard?
 - Which stakeholders were involved?
 - Which implementation strategies were selected?
 - Which desired and unforeseen effects occurred?
 - Which system differences may suggest *adaptation* of the approach piloted in the reference country?

In the development of a European-inspired national validation approach, it may be useful to look at *more than one* possible transfer reference in order to identify options offering various degrees of scope. A dialogue with stakeholders in the education system, trade and industry and society can then take place to clarify which option offers the prospect of sustainable establishment in the system.

The transfer of experiences from other countries into new educational policy and organisational contexts is not a trivial task. Recent discussions on the possibilities of transferring elements of dual VET systems to other countries have reminded us how problematic it can be to attempt system exports on a one-to-one basis, particularly in the field of education. Anyone seeking to utilise good practice of European neighbours for educational policy reforms needs to remain sensitive to the “subtle differences” which always exist, even between education systems which display considerable communalities.

5.2 System differences

The nature of the task posed in connection with the introduction of validation systems differs across the various education systems.

In countries which do not yet have clearly structured validation systems in place, the focus needs to be on developing certifications which are of the same type or of the same value as certifications in formal VET. This requires regulatory measures to fulfil the standards set for recognised vocational education and training. As far as the market value of the certificates is concerned, the emphasis is on the identification of employability skills in accordance with stipulated standards rather than on the mapping of individual learning pathways (Cedefop 2009 a: 21). Quality assurance of the procedures is an indispensable prerequisite in this regard. Equivalence with the certificates of the formal system cannot be decreed by rules. This is something which requires well-founded trust in the validity and reliability of the procedures on the part of the stakeholders in the educational and employment systems.

In some states of Europe, practically oriented vocational training exhibits little in the way of standardisation and formalisation. It is considered to be inferior compared to academic education. In the absence of standardised certificates which are recognised in the employment system, recruitment of vocationally qualified skilled workers by companies is essentially based on competence assessments which may be more or less elaborate and reliable. In many of these countries, European initiatives aimed at instigating national validation of non-formal and informal learning appear as an opportunity for the systematisation of vocational training and for raising quality and transparency in overall terms. The same applies to countries with a market-oriented system of vocational training in which the parallel existence of company training and various course provisions leads to a highly heterogeneous system of certificates.

A different constellation exists in countries in which the system of dual vocational education and training represents a traditional national standard. In such states, the structuring of occupations determines division of labour on the part of the skilled workers, who are adapted on an ongoing basis to developments in work organisation or technology via new and re-regulated occupations. The fear is that different procedures for the documentation and certification of occupational competences which also relate in a flexible manner to smaller bundles of competences below the level of vocationalism could lead to falling below this standard. For this reason, in countries such as Germany or Austria all attempts to establish equivalent evidence procedures for occupational competences alongside the formal qualifications of the VET system have thus far been in vain. Although alternative access to a vocational qualification exists in the form of the external examination, most candidates are participants in non-formal training courses and school-based training measures and only a few are individually registered as persons with low levels of formal qualification. In order to open up this instrument for more broadly based use by the latter group, a series of changes would be necessary, including to the legal foundations. The most important of these changes relates to the regulations governing admission. The current regulation, which states that candidates may only be admitted if they “have been employed in the occupation for which they wish to take the examination for a period at least one and a half times as long as is prescribed for the period of initial training” or if, in exceptional cases, they are able to produce sufficient certification of non-formal training courses, creates high and unnecessarily restrictive

requirements. Many persons with low levels of formal qualification have unstable employment biographies or, particularly in the case of migrants, have difficulties in producing evidence despite the fact that they are in possession of sufficient occupational competences. The barriers to admission to the examination would therefore need to be reduced. To this end Austria has, despite similar reservations, developed new forms of evidence in a step-by-step process which have been jointly drawn up in a procedure involving the state, the social partners and the competent bodies. The driving force here proved to be a serious shortage of qualified skilled workers.

In some countries, recommendations for validation were until a few years ago concentrated on the non-legislative level simply by dint of the fact that virtually no starting points for implementation could be identified at a statutory level. This situation has changed – not because issues relating to the validation in the formal education systems have become popular, but because other reasons have meant that developments for the opening up of formal VET have become effective. In this way, vocational training in the German, Austrian or Swiss dual system has turned into a pioneer for consistent competence orientation. The intention is for training in new or re-regulated occupations to focus on what are viewed as comprehensive employability skills rather than on the acquisition of knowledge to be reproduced in examinations. This requires a further development of training and of the interim and final examinations. Input-oriented standards, which mean that completion of formal training courses guarantees the quality of learning outcomes, are increasingly losing in significance to learning outcome oriented standards. Such a development towards greater competence orientation in vocational education and training creates opportunities to identify and use areas of potential overlap with the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means if there is a relevant restructuring of training. To the extent that competence-oriented curricular and examination procedures have already been put in place, lateral entrants and examination candidates who have not previously completed formal training courses or migrants not in possession of a recognised qualification would not then initially have to acquire examination knowledge to act as an indicator of the necessary employability skills which they possibly previously held. They would then no longer fail because their abilities are not of the type that allow them to cope with a traditional formal examination. They would be able to work in an occupation if they are able to demonstrate the relevant employability skills that are actually needed.

5.3 Stakeholders and areas of responsibility

A low level of acceptance of procedures for the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal learning can be particularly observed in cases where there is an absence of a link with reference standards of vocational education and training and also where such procedures are domiciled outside the institutions governing VET and the labour market. If the procedures are primarily deployed within the scope of projects conducted by individual educational institutions or project stakeholders without any overarchingly defined procedural stipulations, they are marginalised both in terms of content and institutionally. Fixed institutionalisation of the validation

procedures is, however, an essential prerequisite for the general acceptance of certificates. Especially for this reason, regulation of areas of responsibility should take place in a way that avoids parallel structures and houses validation procedures at organisations and institutions which are also responsible for the reference qualifications within the formal system. This does not only prevent intransparency and fragmentation. It also fosters the uniformity of the quality standards in the system as a whole and sends out a strong signal with regard to the equivalence of certificates acquired in the validation procedure.

In states with a low level of awareness and institutional establishment and an absence of financing of validation, the development of centres of excellence for recognition (validation centres) would offer promising long-term prospects. The country studies provide a number of examples of this. In Norway and Switzerland, there are clearly regulated areas of responsibility for the implementation and overall coordination of the validation procedures. In Norway, this task is incumbent on central adult education and VET bodies in the form of the VOX (Norwegian Institute for Adult Education) and the “Directorate of Education”. The validation of educational achievements in Switzerland involves representatives of the branches and sectors, Federal Government and cantons, each with clearly regulated areas of responsibility. Overarching coordination of the activities in the cantons is the task of the Swiss Conference of Vocational Education and Training Offices (SBBK). This largely secures the uniformity and transparency of the approach in these countries. In validation centres, a bundling of all forms of recognition processes could take place. A bundling of areas of responsibility under a single roof would produce synergies in guidance work and lead to opportunities to professionalise advisory and validation activities.

An important role can be played by the national labour administration bodies, and indeed competence assessments for the improvement of the placeability of unemployed persons forms one of their core tasks. In dealing with issues of profiling and matching in a professional manner, they not only collect a multitude of individual data which is of relevance to validations but also have the necessary guidance structures and funding possibilities at their disposal.

Ultimately, validation systems can only function if the involvement of all relevant stakeholders is secured. Links can be established in this regard with the interests of the social partners as well as those of private and charitable organisations. If success is achieved in terms of convincing such bodies of the benefit of validation, they will be able to make a crucial contribution to the establishment of procedures by acting as promoters.

5.4 Accessibility of procedures

If procedures for the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means are to be effective, equivalence of certificates with those of formal VET and firm establishment in important institutions within vocational education and training or on the labour market will not be sufficient. There must also be actual take-up. Some country examples show that, although the

infrastructure for validation has been created in a nationally overarching manner or within individual regions, expected demand on the part of potential validation candidates and particularly from persons with low levels of formal qualification has remained below expectations. Reasons for this may relate to the current labour market situation in the individual countries. Some country experts believe that a high level of unemployment, including amongst those who are well qualified in formal terms, leads to a situation where validation instruments are not at the centre of labour market and educational policy attention and are not actively promoted.

The country reports of the study forming the basis of the present brochure contain a series of indications of restrictions to the demand for competence validation. The author of the report from France lists a number of barriers which explain the low level of demand from workers with low levels of formal qualification despite the effective expansion of the legal framework in the country. These include the complicated procedure for financial approval, alignment towards persons who have spent a long time in one occupation rather than towards those with fragmented employment biographies and the absence of transparency that is caused by the parallel existence of various validation opportunities. A survey of those dropping out of the VAE procedure in France (N=162) showed that the primary reason for abandoning the process was the low level of individualised guidance and support and consequently insufficient preparation for the examination interview (Bernaud 2014: 29). An important element is also the method used for the assessment. In the case of the portfolio in France individuals have to document their learning outcomes by writing down a long dossier. This can be a barrier especially for low skilled workers. In other countries, the assessment is done via a similar exam as those sitting in courses. An additional option to use simulations would offer a much more adaptive or personalized assessment setting, even if the latter are more resource intensive and require to change the way we define and assess learning outcomes.

There are also reports from the Netherlands of a lack of transparency. In the United Kingdom, lack of participation is blamed on failure by the advisory bodies to appeal sufficiently to the target group and a low level of firm establishment of the validation procedures in companies. In Switzerland and a number of other countries, language problems make participation more difficult, in particular for migrants. Validation procedures mostly need to be conducted in the national language, even if a lower level of language competence would be sufficient for the exercising of the occupation.

These reports permit the derivation of recommendations for the organisation of guidance and support structures.

- The most important aspect is the financing of validation procedures. If the validation itself, the preparatory process and attendance at any supplementary training measures that may be required have to be entirely or predominantly funded by the low-skilled participants themselves, then this would be a serious obstacle to participation. For this reason, virtually all cantons in Switzerland are currently complying with the Federal Government recommendation that

validation procedures (including supplementary training courses and guidance and support across all phases of validation) should be offered free of charge for all potential candidates not in possession of a vocational qualification. Detailed regulations in this regard are stipulated by the cantons.

- The availability of face-to-face consultations is also essential. The focus needs to be on developing guidance expertise for validation in the institutions with which persons with low levels of formal qualification have contact anyway rather than in a separate manner. The entry portals in Switzerland and the guidance network in Austria are exemplary in this regard. In addition to this, existing instruments and procedures for the validation of informal and non-formal learning should be actively promoted. Specific information and guidance campaigns should be conducted, particularly for persons with low levels of formal qualification.

5.5 Transparency instruments

A competence-oriented description of qualifications can be supported via transparency instruments such as the “European Qualifications Framework” (EQF), via the respective national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), via the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and in future perhaps also via ESCO, European Taxonomy of Skills, Competences and Occupations which is currently under development. All of the above can assist in developing a standardised language for the results of validation procedures and in aligning these to a competence level. The focus is on learning outcomes. These are delineated both from “input” (the resources which are necessary to achieve results) and from direct “output” in the forms of tests passed or numbers of persons completing qualifications. “Outcomes” represent the further effects of learning processes, employability skills acquired within an area of work or learning. This establishes a “common language” (Cedefop 2009 b), which significantly facilitates transitions and transfer between different learning contexts. Both strands, competence orientation and the NQFs/EQF may be expected to form starting points for the integration of procedures for the validation of the results of informal and non-formal learning. However, these instruments themselves are still at a development stage. A warning needs to be issued against a wait-and-see attitude which puts its faith in the fact that the creation of a suitable set of instruments for validation will, so to speak, be provided from elsewhere.

This particularly applies to the NQFs in countries which do not stipulate a regulatory effect for the qualifications framework. The German Qualifications Framework (DQR), for example, is predicated on the quality assurance, examination and competence assessment procedures in the various educational sectors (BMBF, KMK 2013: 160 ff.). It therefore implies that learning outcomes (however and wherever achieved) are ascertained in a standardised procedure by a relevant competent body. The learning outcomes certified in this manner are then aligned to a reference level (whereby the decision on alignment relates to qualifications and not to individual competences). This is precisely the reason why non-formal and informal learning have failed to gain

entry to the DQR thus far. Because the alignment of informally acquired competences requires a previous validation process, the German EQF Referencing Report stated that the steps needed the involvement of further educational policy stakeholders (BMBF, KMK 2013: 104), in order to allow the necessary “considerable supporting institutional and organisational safeguards” to be put in place (Dehnbostel 2011: 108 ff.).

Nevertheless, NQFs offer organic starting points for the integration of the results of the validation of non-formal and informal learning because they ultimately always need to be aligned to learning outcomes. Formal education and training courses are also so heterogeneous in terms of the forms in which they are imparted, organisational types and certificate cultures that their useful alignment and scaling can ultimately only succeed on the basis of the respective competence level achieved. To this extent, NQFs open up a distinct opportunity to consider informal learning that can only be recorded via its learning outcomes.

5.6 Perspectives

If the establishment of validation systems right across Europe were to succeed, if the good examples were to be transferred to other countries and if binding systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning oriented towards the standards of formal VET were to be developed, this would not merely constitute a major contribution towards securing a supply of skilled workers in a demographically tight situation. It would also assist with occupational integration and help to obtain a stable employment income for many people who, as persons with low levels of formal qualification, have thus far occupied the bottom segments of the labour market, where they are exposed to a high risk of unemployment. At the same time, a reliable validation perspective can also create valuable incentives and impetuses for participation in lifelong learning in overall terms. This is an area in which Europe still needs to catch up if innovation within the economic area is to be maintained and increased. Especially in the light of the increasing automation of activities of low to medium complexity within the context of the fourth industrial revolution (“Industry 4.0”), every incentive for further training will be needed. This is the only way in which workers who lose their positions in the wake of job cuts can be offered new pathways into sustainable employment and the goal of “smart inclusive growth” in Europe can be achieved.

The prerequisite is the establishment of a culture of recognition and credit transfer which proves its worth in the long term and guarantees equivalence of the certificates with qualifications in the formal education system. With due regard for the individual characteristics of the national education systems, this would enable an educational policy to be implemented in European countries that is capable of countering the current challenges and developments on the labour market in a suitable way. In this context the competences of validation practitioners play an important role. The Council Recommendation (2012) maintains that “[...] provision is made for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors” (point 3.g). The Recommendation emphasizes the need to qualify the practitioners in an appro-

appropriate manner. The requirement profile comprises, among others, offering advice and guidance, carrying out assessments and assuring the quality of the validation process.

The aim is not merely the supplementation of an otherwise unchanged formal education system with its time-honoured input-oriented certification practice. This education system must itself be changed. Once established, there would be virtually no limitations on a culture of recognition and credit transfer for informal occupational learning. In the long term, this could also exert a reciprocal effect on formal vocational education and training and ensure outcome and competence orientation in a more sustainable way than via resolutions issued by committees and panels. Then the whole thing would have been worthwhile, not only for persons with low levels of formal qualification.



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