The Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning: implications for mobility

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Abstract

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is gaining importance in the European policy area. The article argues that the European Council 2012 Recommendation marks a new stage in the policy area of validation. The article analyses the Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning in light of its usefulness to support validation of experiences gained through mobility and addresses the main aspects outlined to assure that validation arrangements are targeted to capture mobility experiences.

Key words: validation of non-formal and informal learning, recognition, European inventory, mobility

Résumé

La validation des acquis de l’apprentissage non formel et informel prend de plus en plus d’importance dans le domaine de la politique européenne. L’article montre que la Recommandation du Conseil de l’Union européenne de 2012 marque une nouvelle étape dans le champ politique de la validation. L’article analyse la Recommandation sur la validation des acquis de l’apprentissage non formel et informel en regard de son utilité pour soutenir la validation des expériences acquises dans le cadre d’une mobilité. Il en aborde les principes afin de s’assurer que les dispositions prévues sont ciblées vers la mobilité et permettent d’en saisir les expériences.

Mots-clés: validation des acquis de l’apprentissage non formel et informel, reconnaissance, inventaire européen, mobilité

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Introduction

The importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning has been strongly emphasised within the development of lifelong learning policies in Europe over the last decade. Duvekot, Schuur and Pulusse (2005) signal the publication of the *Commission White Paper on Teaching and Learning* in 1995 as the first milestone in the area of validation. Validation has since acquired an increasingly central part in most of the educational discourse of the EU in the different sectors: general education (Council of the European Union and European Commission, 2015), vocational education and training (VET) (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission, 2002, 2010, 2015), higher education (European Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2009) and adult education (Council of the European Union, 2011). This culminated in the European Council 2012 Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2012) that signals a new stage of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe.

The present article explores in what way the principles set up in the Council Recommendation and the EU policies in the area of validation relate and affect validation of skills acquired in mobility experiences.

1. The road to the 2012 Recommendation

In 2001, the publication of the communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (European Commission, 2001) gave further impetus to the importance of the shift from education to learning. Rooted in the Delors’ declaration (1996), UNESCO’s publication *Learning To Be* (Faure, 1972) and the subsequent changes to the concept of lifelong learning (see e.g. Rubenson, 2001; Jarvis, 2002; Villalba, 2006), the communication emphasises the importance of learning throughout one’s life and across the life span (in formal, non-formal and informal settings). This gave crucial importance to valuing learning that occurs outside formal educational settings as a necessary strategy for educational policies.
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In 2004 the Council presented the conclusion on common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2004), which established the basic common denominator on how to carry out validation in Europe. The principles were formulated at a high level of abstraction and they identified key issues, critical for implementing methods and systems for validation (Cedefop, 2009). This was followed up by the creation of a European Inventory on Validation. The inventory, maintained in Cedefop's webpage (www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory), started to be elaborated in 2004 and it has been updated in 5 occasions (Colardyn and Bjornavold, 2005; Souto Otero, McCoshan and Junge, 2005; Souto Otero, Hawley and Nevala, 2008; European Commission, Cedefop, GHK, 2010; European Commission, Cedefop, ICF International, 2014). Cedefop, together with the Commission, is preparing the 2016 update that will be published at the end of 2016. The inventory provides an overview of the situation of validation practices in Europe. It covers all sectors of education and practices taking place within the labour market or in the voluntary sector. It covers 33 countries (all the EU countries, the EFTA countries and Turkey) and has also thematic studies that go deeper in specific aspects of validation.

In 2004, the process for creating the European Guidelines on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning also started. The guidelines were published in 2009 as the conclusion of the work of the cluster on recognition of learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2009) and in 2014, following the Recommendation of 2012, they were updated (European Commission and Cedefop, 2015). The guidelines aim at clarifying the conditions for implementation of validation arrangements: “The guidelines aim at assisting stakeholders by clarifying the different options and possible steps they face when establishing and operating validation arrangements in Europe” (European Commission and Cedefop, 2015, p. 10). The second edition is the result of a two-year process involving main stakeholders active in the field of validation in Europe (Ibid.)

Both instruments, the Guidelines and the Inventory, can be conceived as supporting tools for the implementation of validation systems in European countries. The Inventory and the Guidelines provided concrete information on policies and practice in the area of validation, thus complementing and developing the content of the common European principles.
2. The 2012 European Council Recommendation on Validation

The Recommendation of December 2012 can be regarded as the beginning of a new stage for validation in Europe. It signals an enhanced political commitment, calling all Member States to establish by 2018 arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning (Villalba et al., 2014) that enable individuals to:

"a) have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated [...]; b) obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part of a qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences" (Council of the European Union, 2012, p. C398/3).

The Recommendation gives explicit importance to periods of mobility as experiences for non-formally and informally acquired learning:

"The member states should, with a view to offering individuals the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned outside formal education and training – including through mobility experiences – and to make use of that learning for their careers and further learning, and with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity." (Ibid., emphasis added)

Several issues are worth noting from the 2012 Recommendation on validation. This policy document sets up a date in which the validation arrangements have to be in place and asks the Commission to report back to the Council by 2019. These emphasised the importance of planning and show political will, forcing the Member States to take action, at least to a certain level. Although the Recommendation is not binding and relies on a soft law approach (Gornitzka, 2006; Villalba, 2010), most Member States have shown an increasing commitment in the area of validation that can be attributed to the establishment of the Recommendation (Cedefop, 2014).

In order to support the implementation of validation arrangements in Europe, the Recommendation asks the Commission, in consultation to the Member States, to update regularly the European Guidelines and the Inventory to support the implementation of validation. In this way, the Guidelines and the Inventory were given political relevance and assure its continuity in the coming years.

The Recommendation gives the overall responsibility for the follow up to the EQF Advisory Group. This is important as the advisory group
The Council Recommendation on validation provides a forum for discussion of issues related to validation. Such a forum can facilitate synergies and coherence within validation policies in Europe. The Commission, in the context of the EQF AG, also organises Peer Learning Activities (PLA) that facilitate policy learning and exchange of views.

3. Principles set up by the Recommendation and its implications for mobility

The Recommendation states that validation arrangements will be implemented “in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate” (Council of the European Union, 2012, p. C398/3). This is normal, as validation arrangements need to be adapted to the existing practices within each country, but leaves room for possible unbalances across European countries. This will be particularly detrimental for international mobility across Member States, as certain validation arrangements might not accommodate the validation of mobility periods carried out in other Member States.

In order to ameliorate this potential problem, and in addition to the organization of PLAs and the overall responsibility given to the EQF AG, the Recommendation addresses a series of principles for validation, that should be applied in the development and implementation of validation arrangements. These are built and take further the ones set up in 2004 (Council of the European Union, 2004). The European Guidelines on Validation (European Commission and Cedefop, 2015) elaborates in each of these principles and present questions that need to be confronted when building a validation system. The European Inventory on Validation (www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory) provides current practices and examples on how these different principles are being implemented. A recent platform created in Cedefop aims at connecting each principle with specific practices in European countries (www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-visualisations/european-database-on-validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning).

The following sections analysis the principles set up by the Recommendation in light of their implications for validation of mobility experiences.
3.1. **Validation as a process**

The first important aspect that the Recommendation highlights is that validation is a process that encompasses four stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification of learning outcomes. This differentiation of stages is an important addition to previous approaches to validation in Europe as it increases the flexibility and usefulness of validation arrangements. The division of the process in stages implies that validation can meet different individual needs and objectives.

The stages allow validation to meet different purposes and can be used differently depending on the user, under a common framework. It can better address the needs of a diverse set of users (e.g. migrants, low qualified people, people in employment or those in unemployment or at risk of unemployment). An individual might want to identify their skills and competences to re-direct their career, they might not want to obtain a full qualification, as this re-direction might be possible without obtaining a formally certified qualification. Thus, the individual might want just to identify or document his/her individual competence, with a “light” certification that does not involve the Ministry of Education (or a similar competent body). The emphasis of the validation process does not need to be always in assessment and certification, as identification and documentation might be sufficient for the individual to obtain the proof that she/he needs on their non-formal or informal learning.

The differentiation of stages is particularly relevant in mobility actions, in which certain skills acquired (e.g. awareness of other cultures, communication skills, etc.) might not be easily translated into a formal *curriculum* or cannot be integrated into a formal qualification. Civil society and youth organisations have emphasized the importance of not “formalising the informal”, as the essence of much of their work and experience might get lost. The establishment of the four stages allows, precisely, more flexibility for arrangements that meet better the individual needs.

3.2. **Linking validation to qualification frameworks**

The Recommendation indicates the importance of linking validation arrangements to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) – and
thus be aligned to the EQF (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2008). The connection of validation to NQF emphasizes two important points. First, it maps any learning acquired through non-formal or informal means to a system of learning outcomes that is identifiable and defined. Second, it places the learning outcomes acquired within a system that is known and accepted by the general public and employers. These, of course, will depend on the level of implementation and development of the NQFs, but having validation as an accepted route into NQF qualifications sends a message of parity.

The EQF is usually compared with a lighthouse that aims at finding your way in the “ocean of qualifications”. The development of NQF and EQF is fundamental for mobility experiences as it will map and level the skills and competences acquired to an existing reference system. This requires, however, that there is a possibility of linking non-formal and informal learning acquired in mobility experiences to a system that is comparable across countries. It is very likely that a mobility experience does not cover the whole learning that a qualification requires, but how do we determine what parts it covers? What parts of the qualification can be seen as equivalent in one country and another? This is only possible if they are based on what a person is able to do and knows at the end of a learning period. This is, the frameworks have to be defined in terms of learning outcomes. The qualifications, defined in learning outcomes, can be compared and analysed to determine which learning outcomes have been acquired in a mobility period and which have not, but the definition and detail of learning outcomes differ tremendously across Europe (Cedefop, forthcoming).

The process of creating the NQF and EQF is slow and requires large consultation and involvement of relevant stakeholders. In many instances it requires the transformation or re-evaluation of the system of qualifications in a country. European countries are working towards further harmonization of their educational systems using the EQF. The process requires both political and technical commitment that generates relevant standards that are common or comparable.
3.3. **The importance of standards**

Linking non-formally and informally acquired skills to NQF requires to comply with another principle that the Recommendation puts forward:

"Qualifications or, where applicable, parts of qualifications obtained by means of the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences comply with agreed standards that are either the same as, or equivalent to, the standards for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes." (European Council, 2012, p. C397/4)

That is to say, the standards used to determine skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning should be equivalent to those obtained through formal education. As is the case for NQFs, this requires that the standards are described in terms of learning outcomes, that is to say, what one is able to do and knows at the end of the course/programme/qualification. If formal qualifications are described and standardised through input measures, such as number of years, or linked to the specific learning context (e.g. school classroom), it is obvious that it will be difficult for validation of non-formal and informal learning to use similar standards. In order to work for validation, qualifications cannot only rely on input measures, but on actual skills and competences acquired.

The difficulty is determining what level of granularity the learning outcome should have. As in the case of a qualification, what is learnt in one system, through formal, non-formal or informal learning needs to be comparable to what is learnt in another system. This requires some type of harmonization of the learning outcomes and standards that define qualifications and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Credit systems might facilitate some of this harmonization.

3.4. **The relationship between validation and credit systems**

The development of learning outcomes will be facilitated by validation arrangements that make sure that “synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, such as ECTS and ECVET” (European Council, 2012, p. C399/c). The existence of ECVET or ECTs will facilitate connection of the validation process to the formal systems of education, as it makes the validation divisible into parts that can be more easily accumulated and
transferred. Credit systems had traditionally relied on input measures, linked to number of hours attending class. It has evolved, however, into a system that aims at taking into account both input and output measures. The last review of the ECTs shows it clearly: “ECTS credits express the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload” (European Commission, 2015). It is, thus, “associated workload”, theoretically calculated, and the actual learning and skills acquired that count. ECVET, on the other hand, has from the very beginning relied on learning outcomes, using “units of learning outcomes” as the building block for qualifications.

However, the creation of credits does not automatically imply that qualifications will be more easily connected to validation of non-formally acquired knowledge and skills, as the content of the qualifications (and thus, their learning outcomes) might differ from one country to another. It is the combination of the three – a system of qualifications articulated in an NQF and reference to EQF, the harmonization of standards and its definition in learning outcomes, as well as the existence of a credit system – that will determine a well-functioning validation system across countries and thus its full potential use for mobility experiences.

3.5. Quality assurance of validation

Credit systems, as NQFs to some degree, will facilitate the acceptance of validation as an accepted route to obtaining qualifications and thus, for mobility experiences to be accounted within formal education. The both, credits systems and NQFs, have reliable and accepted quality assurance mechanisms (at least to some degree). If validation practices rely on those existing quality assurance mechanisms, they will be more easily accepted. The Recommendation echoes this and indicates the importance of having transparent quality assurance measures for validation.

It is important, however, to consider in what way validation of non-formal and informal learning might have different requirements than formal education. For example, the methods for judging an individual’s abilities and knowledge need to be sensitive to the learner and do not depend on the context of learning. The 2014 European Inventory (European Commission et al., 2014) actually shows that in the majority
of the countries, the quality assurance of validation is embedded in the existing QA mechanisms or it is left to the training providers to assure that quality. Only in few sectors and in few countries there is a specific system of quality assurance for validation. More needs to be done to assure that the existing quality assurance that works with credit transfer or awarding qualifications can clearly connect to the needs of validation. Mechanisms for quality assurance have been well developed in several mobility projects and can be extrapolated for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Quality assurance relies also on the adequate provision of professional development opportunities of staff involved in validation. The professionalization of practitioners, their adequate training and a clear delimitation of their roles and responsibilities will contribute to maintain quality assurance.

In the case of mobility experiences, this requires that validation practitioners are aware and familiar with the tools that are available for documenting the mobility experiences such as: learning contracts, skills reference charts or common transparency tools.

3.6. Europass system and validation

It is also important that those documents are integrated and can be used in the process of validation. The Recommendation calls for “the use of Union transparency tools, such as the Europass framework and Youthpass, is promoted in order to facilitate the documentation of learning outcome” (European Council 2012, p. C398/3).

Europass is a series of documents and templates that aim at helping citizens to communicate their skills and qualifications effectively across Europe, and easily understood by employers and education and training authorities. The Youthpass “is a European recognition tool for non-formal and informal learning in youth work” (https://www.youthpass.eu/en/youthpass/).

Europass and Youthpass can serve as documental evidence of the experiences gained through a mobility period, but it is hard to consider them as evidence that will automatically grant you a formal qualification. They are designed to support the process of assessment that might lead to a specific
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formal certification; they are not thought as certification tools, but rather as documentation tools. The crucial aspect being what assessment method is used to document the learning acquired. In certain cases, the Europass or Youthpass might have very explicit assessment methods that clearly identified and corroborate specific learning outcomes. In other cases, the Union transparency tools might only be based in self-reporting.

As indicated above, depending on what is the aim of the validation process, this documentation of learning outcomes might or might not be sufficient. A simple self-reporting document or the report from a mentor in the mobility programme might constitute enough proof to obtain what the individual wants, for example, an interview with an employer. In other cases, this documentation might require more reliable methods of assessment that provide proof of the learning outcomes acquired, as the objective might be to include this mobility experience into a formal qualification.

Conclusion

The Recommendation of 2012 shows a new political commitment to validation of non-formal and informal learning. It asks Member States to have validation arrangements in place by 2018. It explicitly indicates that mobility periods need to be taken into account within those validation arrangements. It establishes a series of principles that will facilitate the integration of mobility experiences into a coherent validation system. This requires, however, coordination among relevant stakeholders and a certain degree of harmonization of the validation systems. The principles described in the Recommendation and further elaborated in the European Guidelines, this article shows, can contribute towards this least common denominator of validation arrangements in Europe.

If the results and the process of validation in a country are very different from those in another country, international mobility will be hampered and the full potential of skills and competences acquired through the mobility period will not be realised. It is important that countries continue to learn from each other and advance towards more integrated and coherent trusted validation systems.
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