Nowadays individuals acquire new skills through limitless learning opportunities – not only in traditional settings but also at work, through participation in civil society organisations, in ‘virtual space’ or individually. Recognising and validating the skills and competences acquired through these forms of learning would support the social inclusion and empowerment of people, especially those with limited opportunities to access formal education. The process of validation of non-formal and informal learning helps to bridge educational inequalities, and offers further pathways for the development of the skills needed in life and in the labour market.

This document brings together a background paper on validation and a case study by our Member Työväen Sivistysliitto TSL – the Workers’ Educational Association WEA of Finland. With their tool ‘LEVEL 5’ they recognise informal and non-formal knowledge. Overall, the aim of the project was to evaluate inter-cultural competence and informal learning in social and healthcare services with LEVEL 5.
Competent personnel promote further integration
INTRODUCTION

Nowadays individuals acquire new skills through limitless learning opportunities – not only in traditional settings but also at work, through participation in civil society organisations, in ‘virtual space’ or individually. Recognising and validating the skills and competences acquired through these forms of learning would support the social inclusion and empowerment of people, especially those with limited opportunities to access formal education. The process of validation of non-formal and informal learning helps to bridge educational inequalities, and offers further pathways for the development of the skills needed in life and in the labour market. In times of rapidly rising unemployment – particularly acute among young people – and negative economic growth, making use of new learning opportunities outside the formal system and of the skills acquired through these is urgent. Europe needs to develop the right mix of skills and achieve a better match between skills and jobs to help boost competitiveness and prosperity.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences in EU member states makes an essential contribution to EU’s ambition to achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth outlined in the Europe 2020 Strategy. Notably, the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on the validation of non-formal and informal learning adopted in 2012 acknowledged the important role to be played by validation in relation to employment and mobility. It paved the way towards increased cooperation between the EU and member states, hoping to achieve their joint goal of national validation arrangements in all countries by 2018.

Significant progress on the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been made in the last few years in the context of implementing the Council Recommendation. However, the provision of real access, awareness, recognition and financial support remains a great challenge. This is particularly evident for disadvantaged groups, such as low-qualified adults who are in need of priority access to validation of their non-formal and informal learning.

POLICY OVERVIEW

1. Strategy at EU level
The validation of non-formal and informal learning is one of the most debated policies in education and training at European level. It has been identified as a policy priority in EU strategies and is considered an important part of realising lifelong learning. Several policy initiatives have been taken in order to advance the process of validation and build pathways between non-formal, informal and formal learning. Validation has been identified as a policy priority in these EU documents:

- **2013**: Council Recommendation establishing a Youth Guarantee.
- **2012**: Council recommendation of 20 of December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which calls on member states to put validation arrangements in place by 2018.
- **2012**: Council conclusions towards a job-rich recovery and giving a better chance to Europe’s youth.
- **2011**: Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning.
- **2006**: Council Resolution on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field.
- **2004**: Council Conclusion on Common Euro-
• The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
• Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek balanced participation.
• The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
• The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.1

The principles are the reference point and the baseline when exploring and developing suitable practical national solutions and are applied on a voluntary basis. The Council encourages member states and non-governmental organisations engaged in providing lifelong learning opportunities to use and adapt the common European principles as appropriate.

1.2. Council recommendation
In its Europe 2020 flagship programme ‘An agenda for New skills and Jobs’, and in its recent initiatives on the Single Market Act and the Employment Package, the Commission announced its proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012). This was its response to the economic crisis, and the urgent need to increase the mobility of labour to reduce shortages in the skilled workforce, and also the need for a better valuing of skills and competences acquired outside formal systems. This Recommendation states that developing validation systems can contribute to the EU’s ambition to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth as set out by the Europe 2020 Strategy. Validation mechanisms allow for more transparency on the skills available in the workforce, and they facilitate a better match between skills and labour demand. They also provide...
Remote better transferability of skills between companies and other sectors, and they facilitate mobility on the European labour market. It stresses that validation can support economic recovery, and can also contribute towards the achievement of the Europe 2020 headline targets for early school leaving.

Moreover, validation empowers people by giving visibility to the skills acquired in alternative learning environments. It could serve as a tool to fight with the aggravating inequalities in the society, and become leverage for further opportunities. The Recommendation invites member states to establish a national system of validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes by 2018. These arrangements should be linked to qualifications frameworks and rely on transparent quality assurance measures supporting valid and credible validation methodologies and tools.

In the Recommendation, arrangements for validation aim to enable individuals to:

1. “have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, including, where applicable, through open educational resources;
2. obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences (…)”

In addition, the Recommendation includes the following measures:

- Provide individuals with the opportunity to undergo an audit of their skills and competences within three months of an identified need such as the prospect of unemployment or insecure forms of employment. For this purpose, the use of the current and future Europass tools to facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes should be promoted. The links between validation arrangements and credit systems such as ECTS and ECVET should be strengthened.

- Involve social partners (employers and trade unions) and other relevant stakeholders (namely chambers of commerce, industry and skilled crafts organisations, national entities involved in the process of the recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers and also civil society organisations) in the development of the validation mechanisms. They should also be involved in documenting the learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

The Council Recommendation has paved the way towards establishing validation arrangements in the member states, and created opportunities to raise awareness on the benefits of validation.

2. EU-level measures

The EU Institutions have established a number of tools to support the transparency and recognition of knowledge, skills, and competences:

- In 2004, the Europass framework was established, including the Europass CV and a portfolio of documents which individuals can use to better communicate and present their qualifications and competences throughout Europe. The Europass draws attention to people’s skills and abilities, including those acquired outside
formal education and training. The structure of the Europass serves to encourage the identification and recognition of learning, and therefore competence and qualifications levels. This is an important step towards full recognition, validation and certification. So far these tools have only been able to capture a limited amount of non-formal or informal learning taking place in the home country.

• Similarly, Youthpass – a tool for documenting learning outcomes for non-formal and informal learning in youth work was developed. With Youthpass, the participants of the Erasmus+ and the Youth in Action programmes can describe the skills they gained through participating in these programmes.

• The adoption in 2008 by the European Parliament and the Council of the Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning was a major landmark on the road towards the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The EQF is a reference framework of eight qualification levels defined through learning outcomes: knowledge, skills and competences. This makes it easier to understand what a learner with an EQF qualification knows and is able to do. Thus the EQF helps compare national qualifications systems and it promotes workers’ and learner’s mobility across Europe.

The development of EQF has resulted in an ongoing process under which all member states are setting up their own National Qualification Framework and they can reference their qualifications against the European qualification levels.

• In 2009, the European Commission and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) published European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. These guidelines provide policy-makers and practitioners with technical advice on validation. They focus on different validation perspectives (e.g. individual, organisational, national and European), and they form a practical tool that can be applied on a voluntary basis. The update of guidelines is currently under preparation by the European Commission and will be adopted by the end of 2015.

• Peer learning and the exchange of good practice have been promoted through a regularly updated European Inventory of policy and practice across Europe. The European Inventory is closely connected to the European Guidelines on validation, and it exemplifies the principles outlined in the guidelines in a concrete way.

3. National strategies
The validation of non-formal and informal learning forms an important part of national lifelong learning and employment strategies. European developments made an impact on developments at the national level, and they fostered implementation of national systems for validating non-formal and informal learning.

The newest European Inventory published in 2014 suggests that creation of national validation systems is taking place in most of the countries, but further development of practical validation arrangements is needed (see table 3.1). The Inventory identified 4 groups of countries by the status of their national strategy for validation.
FUTURE CHALLENGES

Less than three years are left to achieve the objective of establishing national systems of validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes by 2018 – as invited by the Council Recommendations. While the interest in validation is growing, but many gaps still remain. The process is uneven in different countries, and by 2018 some countries will already have well established validation systems while others will be only at the beginning of the process. Even the established validation systems will have to overcome a number of challenges.

Following the latest European Inventory, one of the main challenges for validation systems is information and awareness. In most countries, learners are not aware of existing validation opportunities, making their skills remain ‘invisible’ so they are not used to their full potential. Education institutions, civil society and youth organisations should mobilise market outcomes of validation.\(^3\)

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Table 3.1 National (or where relevant regional) strategy for validation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehensive strategy in place</th>
<th>Strategy in place but some elements missing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FI, FR, ES</td>
<td>CZ, DK, EE, IT, IS, LU, LV, NO, NL, PL, RO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT, BE-Flanders, CH, CY, DE, EL, LI, LT, MT, PT, SI, SK, TR</td>
<td>BE-Wallonia, BG, HR, HU, IE, SE, UK- E&amp;NI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Strategy is in development | No strategy in place |

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation.

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\(^3\) European Commission and CEDEFOP: European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014
the progress of developing validation systems in member states.

Moreover, the recently adopted Riga Conclusions (June 2015) on Vocational Education and Training have also acknowledged the necessity of putting comprehensive validation systems into place. It stated that “To help people progress in learning, and find, maintain and advance in work within and across countries, the next step should be to move from a ‘tool by tool’ to a more integrated approach focused on user needs, make them widely known and use them systematically”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The number of skills-intensive jobs is incessantly increasing while the demand for low-skilled jobs is declining. Therefore, a holistic approach to lifelong learning, focusing on supporting not only access to the labour market, but also personal empowerment and development of transversal skills is needed. Therefore, people should have access to lifelong learning opportunities, and a right to the validation of learning outcomes through non-formal and informal learning.

1. Sufficient investment in the development and maintenance of appropriate validation systems must be ensured – and specific funds for non-formal and informal learning should be allocated. In order to bridge educational inequalities, and empower people with limited opportunities to access formal education, it is necessary to acknowledge competences and qualifications developed through alternative learning environments. Therefore, despite austerity, investment in financing the validation of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning is crucial.

learning is needed to provide people with equal opportunities to access further education and the labour market by making the validation of competences an individual right.

2. Promote and strengthen the recognition of skills, competences and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning within society and at the workplace. This includes setting up national validation mechanisms for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning that enable participation and empowerment. National validation mechanisms for recognising the learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning need to be set up by 2018. This would enable the empowerment and participation of the most vulnerable.

3. Increase the cooperation between member states in promoting the recognition of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and enable the peer-learning

4. Revise the roadmap for the implementation of the validation arrangements to allow the member states that already have validation schemes to share their experience with countries that are at the very beginning of the process

5. Ensure the validation systems recognise social and life skills gained within and outside work, in non-formal and informal settings. Validation systems need also to be recognised by social partners and society, in legal as well as in social terms.

6. Develop a strategy to actively support the creation of learning societies and learning workplaces, promoting the validation of skills, competences and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning within society and at the workplace.

7. Increase the use and strengthen the recognition of validation of non-formal and informal learning for migrants and refugees. The identification and validation of prior competences are strategic tools for migrants and refugees to speed up their inclusion and integration into society.

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

2. European Commission and CEDEFOP “European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning”, 2014.
CASE STUDY BY TYÖVÄEN SIVISTYSLIITTO TSL, FINLAND

COMPETENT PERSONNEL PROMOTE FURTHER INTEGRATION

The aim of the project was to evaluate inter-cultural competence and informal learning in social and healthcare services with LEVEL 5. The level of inter-cultural competence was measured in each workplace before and after the intervention. Participants contributed to the definition process of intercultural competence in social and healthcare services.
Validation

SHORT SUMMARY OF THE ORGANISATION

Työväen Sivistysliitto TSL – the Workers’ Educational Association WEA of Finland, is one of the biggest Finnish educational associations (study centres), measured by the volume of activities and by the participation in studies.

TSL/WEA is a decentralized organization providing educational services directly to our students. It is facilitated by the regional services and communications technology supplied by TSL-WEA of Finland. TSL-WEA of Finland focuses on team work skills, communicative skills, IT skills and self-actualization and it promotes educational activity in Finnish society generally. It also provides general adult education, especially for the less-educated adult population hit hardest by the ongoing structural change.

It offers advisory services and consultancy services on education, it trains tutors and leaders for study groups, it organizes courses and it publishes study material. TSL-WEA of Finland also has many years of experience organizing distance teaching and multi-method training.

For TSL-WEA of Finland, Europe stands for the free movement of people, and communication. Innovation, language skills and communicative networks at the grassroots level are the key to this goal. It trains local-level decision makers to become experts on the regional and structural policy of the European Union.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

What are the local conditions?

LEVEL 5 is a tool to recognise informal and non-formal knowledge. It has been developed since 2005 into a network of experts in lifelong learning from 15 European countries. LEVEL 5 has been tested in more than 50 learning projects and evaluated scientifically in two European doctoral research papers. It analyses and structures cognitive, affective and active learning. The method recognises, evaluates, measures and structures learning, skills, knowledge and development. The idea is to show learning processes and outcomes outside formal education systems, and recognise skills and knowledge learned by oneself and as an employer. Furthermore, it aims to promote empowerment of the learner, to make them feel they are ‘someone who can’. When the development of learning is documented it can be recognised.

What are the key characteristics of the project/service?

Target groups/users
Social and healthcare services

Principles
Knowledge and learning are estimated individually, with regard to each topic and in a context. Each evaluates an individual’s personal knowledge, their social and organisational skills, and their attitudes in a given situation.

It is essential to recognise the kind of learning, information and skills that are needed in each context. Who is qualified to evaluate that? What is the aim of the evaluation? Why is evaluation beneficial? Who benefits? Is it the individual, their work community, the employer, society and/or the educational institute? Learning to recognise this additionally promotes cross-disciplinary competence, and the development of an individual’s work.

The topic, course, programme, project or other relevant context and the target group, are the basis for defining the criteria for evaluation and the kind of learning that is sought. In this way, different various factors can be taken into account.

Method
The evaluation took place in two stages, firstly at
The evaluation process proceeded as follows:
1. Discussion with participants about the ways to understand and define inter-cultural competence. It was processed together with ideas on ideas on intercultural competence in the social and health care sector.
2. The selection of measured topics (both in general and individual level). The topics were chosen in learning groups, so selection was already part of common learning. Respecting identity and different values and habits
   - Acting for equality
   - Recognising different caring cultures
   - Taking minorities’ needs into account
   - Recognising and developing the needs of intercultural communication
   - Evaluating and developing the orientation process
   - Developing customer service
   - Recognising and respecting different backgrounds and experiences
3. The trainers chose real cases applicable to the topics chosen earlier. The trainers created alternatives 1-5 for each case – including “what I know, how I feel and how I act in a given situation”.
4. The evaluation was based on a questionnaire at the start and interviews at the end. The questionnaire introduced various contacts with customers from which the respondents chose options with regard to their ways of reacting to the moment - thinking, acting and feeling. During the evaluations at the end, the participants reflected on their own development and the recognition of it.

Outcome
The results are personal and subject to change. The success of the project can be measured at the individual and group level in the changes in the ways people think, act and react.

Written by Inari Juntumaa, Mervi Ylitalo - TSL
SOLIDAR Foundation, in cooperation with its national members and partners, has gathered examples of national programmes and initiatives that present the innovative and successful approaches that contribute to the process of building inclusive learning societies. The case studies are centred on themes of lifelong learning, civic and citizenship education, the validation of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, and NEETs (young people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training).