![EUCIS-LLL logo]

SEMINAR

**VALIDATION AND RECOGNITION OF LEARNING IN EUROPE:
FROM RHETORIC TO PRACTICE**

12th December 2011, Brussels

GENERAL REPORT

On 12th December 2011, EUCIS-LLL organised a seminar on *"Validation and recognition of learning in Europe: from rhetoric to practice"*. It aimed at discussing the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning in view of the upcoming European Commission's proposal for a Council recommendation on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning beginning of 2012 It gathered more than 50 participants representing various stakeholders: civil society experts and practitioners, social partners and public institutions from the local, national and European levels. This report gives a short overview of the discussions that took place.

Recent years have seen increased emphasis on the relevance of learning that takes place outside formal systems and on ways and strategies to validate such learning. Validation of non-formal and informal learning contributes to recognise learning outcomes independent of the context in which the learning took place – whether in formal, non-formal or informal settings. One of the objectives of validation of non-formal and informal learning is to broaden access to education and qualifications, by offering a second chance or a relevant alternative to "non-traditional" learners. Validation has also an important formative role in motivating and empowering individuals and can be a first step to further learning. But not all countries have national legislation in place to promote and regulate the use of validation of informal and non-formal learning. Do we really see a progression in the use of validation in Europe in the last ten years? The current development of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) is supposed to provide overarching structures to bridge systems and encourage a shift towards learning outcomes. How are these developments connected at the national level?

Validation is a top priority in the European agenda. It is mentioned in the strategic work programme "Education and Training 2020"[1] as well as in the flagship initiatives "Youth on the Move" and an "Agenda for New Skills and Jobs". Some tools have been developed such as the European Guidelines for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning or the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning[2]. The EU has also supported many innovative projects through the Lifelong Learning Programme. More recently, the European Commission is preparing a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning beginning of 2012. EUCIS-LLL members share this focus given to validation as a concrete tool to promote lifelong learning in Europe. However it notes that progress is still slow and that it is crucial to move from theory to practice. The seminar aimed at reflecting upon the way to tackle those challenges by enabling a fruitful debate between the invited experts and the audience made of various stakeholders, experts and practitioners alike.

---

1 *Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET2020"), 28 May 2009 (2009/C119/02)*

2 *See for the framework : http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory.aspx*

WELCOME WORDS

Niamh O'REILLY chaired this seminar. She is Head of Membership Services in the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS) and member of the executive board of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). With ten years of experience in adult education, Niamh has excellent knowledge of accreditation of non-formal and informal learning and contributes every day to build a strong voice for adult learning and create greater awareness on its wider benefits.

PANEL

Koen NOMDEN, from the European Commission (DG EAC, Policy Officer on Skills and Qualifications – Validation of non-formal and informal learning and lifelong guidance), shared some basic definitions on the different forms of learning and enhanced the economic, social and individual benefits of validation in a life-wide approach to learning. In times of crisis, validation should be a lever for competitiveness and growth; it enables to have a more skilled workforce, an increased visibility of what individuals know, understand and are able to do and a better skills match. On a social aspect, validation makes lifelong learning a reality with a better use of individuals' full potential and a better access to an inclusive labour market for vulnerable groups. Then he presented the position and agenda of the Commission in this field. Non-formal and informal learning have been addressed from 2004 on with the European common principles on validation[3], in 2008 via the European Qualifications Framework[4] and in 2009 with the European Guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning[5], which gave birth to several validation tools like the Europass. Today in the EU 2020 Strategy, four flagship initiatives are linked to lifelong learning and may address validation challenges: Youth on the Move, Agenda for New Skills and Jobs, Digital Agenda, European Platform Against Poverty. In this framework, the Commission will propose at the beginning of 2012 a Council Recommendation on the Promotion and Validation of Non-Formal and iInformal Learning. As for the national level, Mr Nomden stressed that member states should link validation to the developments of national qualification frameworks, entitlements for individuals and allow a greater involvement of stakeholders.

Jo HAWLEY from GHK Consulting has been working on the latest developments of validation in Europe. She introduced the 2010 update of the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP). She stated that thirty-four countries were included through ten case studies, four thematic reports, one overall synthesis report and one catalogue of projects. All have different approaches to validation: some of them adopted national legislations or guidelines while others implemented projects or activities to test new systems in a bottom-up approach. One major obstacle is the lack of data on cost and benefit assessments. Only a few states have a national budget dedicated to validation and the majority finances validation programmes thanks to European grants. GHK was asked to issue a categorisation of

---

3 Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, Brussels, 18 May 2004, 9600/04

4 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, Brussels, 23 April 2008, (2008/C 111/01)

5 See above

member states by development level. The consultancy divided countries in four groups: high, medium-high, medium-low and low development. Mrs Hawley stressed that this work was not exhaustive since assessing an overall development was very difficult, as many national approaches, sectors and evaluation methods were to be taken into consideration. She pointed out that in general, centrally-regulated member states achieved a higher level of development. However, the situation is much more complex and other critical factors should be taken into account such as the country legal framework, economic and sectorial drivers as well as the influence of stakeholders. Numerous challenges remain in the field of validation: the terminology and aims are poorly defined, funding and sustainability are uncertain and a greater trust in validation is needed. Data collection remains crucial in order to improve the implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

DISCUSSION WITH PARTICIPANTS

Q: As for the validation terminology, why not using the term "recognition" and why not enhancing more volunteering activities? Besides, disabled people should also count in this debate.

Koen NOMDEN agreed that there is a difference between validation and recognition as the latter is a much wider concept. Volunteering may not be mentioned but that does not mean that the Commission does not see it as important in the field of validation. As for disabled people, the Commission includes them in the vulnerable groups that he mentioned previously.
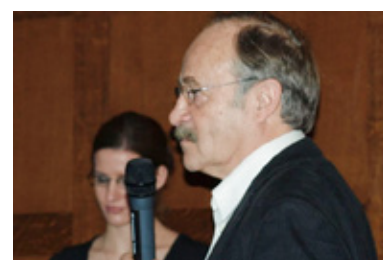
Q: is not the line between centrally-regulated and the bottom-up approaches difficult to draw in member states to assess their development in terms of validation?

Jo Hawley conceded that very often, both strategies overlapped but she emphasised that states which based their strategy on local/pilot projects had achieved in general lower development levels than centrally-regulated countries.

CASE STUDIES

PRIME Project - Problems of Recognition in Making Erasmus
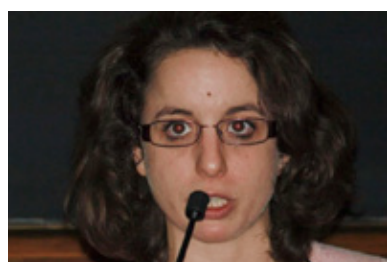
Tania BERMAN, President of the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), presented the 2010 PRIME Project - Problems of Recognition in Making Erasmus. More complex than the first edition of the research project, the 2010 edition consisted in both a qualitative and a quantitative approach. It aimed at drawing attention to ever-lasting obstacles of the Erasmus programme to recognition, mapping good practices and providing solutions and recommendations in order to improve the quality of exchange and increase the number of participants. The main problems identified during the recognition process are: incompatibility of study programmes, problems with credit calculation (misuse of ECTS, problems with grade transfer (that leads to partial recognition upon return), bureaucratic issues (the complicated procedures connected mainly to the Learning Agreement that frequently changes and lack of communication with coordinators), attitude of certain professors who refuse to recognise courses and insufficient information provision. ESN therefore proposed a set of recommendation and is asking for better information provision,

binding bilateral agreements and the creation of mobility windows. As for the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), it should be the only credit system across Europe with uniformity in ECTS calculation through a grading scale or the development of another, more transparent grade conversion method. European study programmes should be more flexible, the course recognition procedure clarified and the role of home universities professors should be more taken into account.

Observatory on the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Europe (OBSERVAL)

Michel FEUTRIE, former President of the European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) and EUCIS-LLL Secretary General, presented the Observatory on the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Europe (OBSERVAL), granted by the Leonardo da Vinci programme with twenty-four EU country partners. EUCEN's initial aim was to create a European observatory on validation practices by collecting, updating and presenting accurate data for each country in the same format, as well as identifying good practices, reviewing national debates and discussions and their articulation with European initiatives. The website allows easy access, understanding and comparability for a large range of actors to documents that are usually confidential or limited in use outside the country they have been produced. Four categories of data are available: formal information (official texts, statistics), an annual state of play, case studies and an annotated bibliographical review. The final report of the project outlines that OBSERVAL managed to establish a network of validation experts from different sectors, to collect much relevant data and create a genuine momentum that should be kept with supportive structures. Indeed, the end of the project may also mean the phasing out of national discussions, especially in countries where VNF-IFL practices are still emerging. Besides, the data collected will soon become obsolete and the Community of Practice that emerged cannot sustain itself without the input of a management team. Therefore, it is essential to intensify the exchange and level of collaboration of the network and develop a comprehensive and systematic approach for a comparative analysis in a short term. In a mid-term perspective the present results of the OBSERVAL network call for focused discussions in the direction of developing a joint approach with the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning and the revised European Validation-Guidelines.

The case of e-facilitators in non-formal education and telecentres, Vet4e-Inclusion

Milvia RASTRELLI from the Agency for the Promotion of the Solidaristic Enterprise (L'A.P.I.S) presented the case of e-facilitators in non-formal education and telecentres. The Vet4e-Inclusion project was established in the framework of the European strategy on digital inclusion (Riga declaration, "i2010 initiative"…) and carried out by a consortium of seven organisations representing various sectors from Spain, Italy, France, Germany and Bulgaria with the support of the Leonardo da Vinci programme. On the basis of a cross-country analysis, the partners developed an innovative scope of the

common challenges of e-Inclusion and a training curriculum for e-Facilitators (ICT trainers) focused on the development of key competences for users at risk of social exclusion, aiming to their empowerment in the knowledge society. The project is based on the idea that information and communications technology (ICT) is a vehicle for personal development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability while ICT trainers are also socio-cultural mediators and the promoters of disadvantaged users' inclusion. The project aims at recognising this role and promoting the development of certifiable and transparent training solutions that correspond to their needs. However the recognition of their professional profile is still limited in Europe. The main deliverables of the project are available online.

DISCUSSION WITH THE PARTICIPANTS

Q: how did APIS manage to unify curriculums for the Vet4e-Inclusion project?

Milvia RASTRELLI recognised that it was very difficult to unify curriculums because of course, it was not only a matter of translation but also of cultural differences.

Q: how come that there is almost no mention of non-formal and informal learning in the Commission's draft proposal for the new "Erasmus for all" funding programme?

Koen Nomden explained that the Commission decided to merge all educational sectors in the new fund under the common name "Erasmus for all", and this for several reasons (better communication, a holistic approach to lifelong learning, a systemic impact...).

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Developing validation practices is about valuing a life-long and life-wide approach to learning by enabling an in-depth modernisation of education and training systems to create open, flexible learning environments. It contributes to break down barriers between different kinds of education and training and enhances the importance of non-formal and informal learning with a paradigm shift towards learning outcomes. We witness an emulation of European and national strategies, guidelines and tools to support this shift like the European Qualifications Framework and its national developments. Yet according to the Council[6], lifelong learning strategies remain rarely coherent and comprehensive and keep on focusing on specific sectors or target groups. There is still a long way to go to acknowledge and coordinate validation practices for non-formal and informal learning, so that all forms of learning are recognised. As for the terminology of validation, the term should be clearly defined in the framework of a sustained support for a real life-wide learning approach with bridges between sectors and actors, starting with a clear mention of non-formal learning in the Commission's new funding programme "Erasmus for all". The aims of validation shall also be clearly stated, social inclusion being on an equal footing with the skills match for better competitiveness. Concerning the implementation of those practices, funding and sustainability remain uncertain and trust has to be fostered. Further progress in data collection remains crucial, as well as a better use of existing tools like the ECTS and ECVET and of innovative ones. Grassroots initiatives have a key role to play in that sense with a solid partnership to be established between stakeholders.

---

6 *Joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of ET2010 work program, Brussels, 18 January 2010, 5394/10*
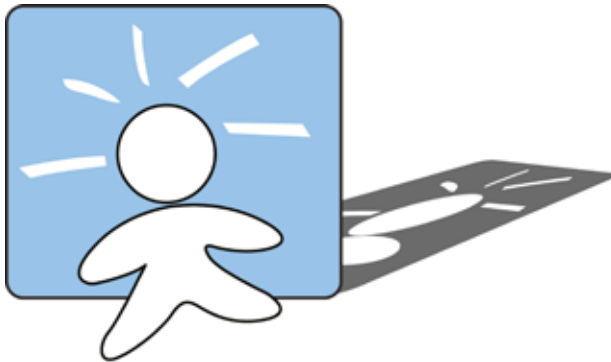
The European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning

EUCIS-LLL Platform
25 rue d'Arlon
B-1050 Brussels
Contact: info@eucis-lll.eu
More info: www.eucis-lll.eu