



Taking Validation of NFIL
One Step Further!

POSITION

European societies are facing numerous challenges such as rising unemployment and inequalities. The 2013 [PIAAC \(OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies\) report](#) highlights the fact that 20% of the EU adult population have low literacy and numeracy skills. If the correlation between education and employment and especially to quality employment as well as to poverty is well known, one's qualification does not always correspond to his or her knowledge and skills. The lack of strong validation systems that allow for one's knowledge, skills and competences, which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning to be validated, only makes it more difficult to tackle unemployment and poverty in the EU. The 2012 [Council Recommendation](#) on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) is a first step towards more satisfactory validation policy frameworks in the EU. It gave a political impulse for Member States to speed up the building of well-functioning validation systems in partnership with stakeholders. However, according to the CEDEFOP [2014 European Inventory on Validation](#), "most countries need to further develop their practical validation arrangements". The Lifelong Learning Platform proposes 5 key success factors for the implementation of VNIL and to take validation policy frameworks in the EU one step further.

VALIDATION: A KEY PRIORITY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

1. **Validation is a great tool to make lifelong learning a reality for the largest number of people.** It can contribute to broaden access to further learning and qualifications especially for disadvantaged groups by giving formal value to personal development and contributing to career development and employability.
2. **Validation is about valuing a life-long and life-wide approach to learning by breaking down barriers** between different kinds of education and training and by enhancing the importance of non-formal and informal learning.
3. **Validation does not only concern occupational competences but also transversal competences** (such as critical thinking, research skills, ICT, entrepreneurship, etc.) thanks to a learning outcomes approach. The definition of standards should for instance take into account the European Key Competences framework for lifelong learning.
4. **Validation is an investment:** recognising knowledge, skills and competences of citizens will contribute to upgrading the work force and to put back low-skilled citizens into learning. It has a high return on investment in terms of social welfare (unemployment, health), participation and well-being.
5. **Validation cannot serve its purpose if it is not recognised** as an opportunity to tackle unemployment and poverty.

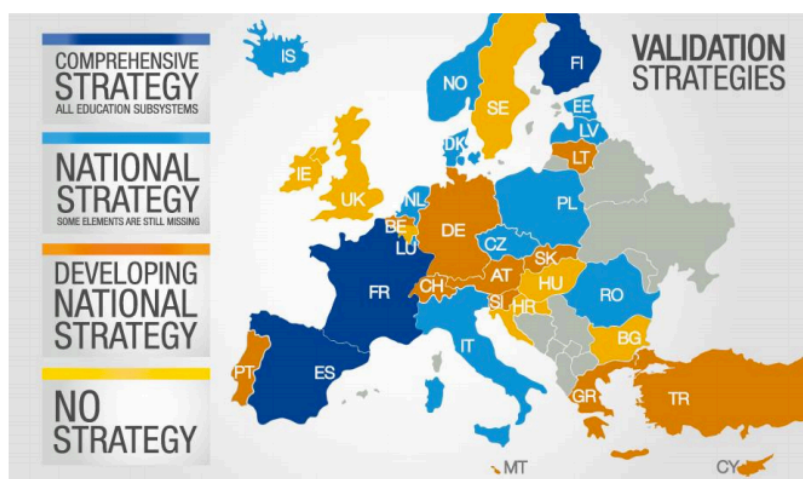
5 KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF VNIL

1. Long-term and sustainable strategies for validation

The implementation of validation systems requires a shift of approach towards **learning outcomes**. The launch of the European qualifications framework (EQF) at EU level and the rapid development of national qualifications frameworks (NQF) at national level set the scene for the development of validation policy frameworks in the EU. The EQF and the NQFs describe a set of knowledge, skills and competences an individual has acquired after the completion of a learning process instead of describing the number of hours the student has spent in a classroom for example. By providing a reference framework it makes validation much easier to implement. Yet in some European countries the levels 7 and 8 of the NQF are reserved to university degrees, which require ECTS points often related to the number of attendance hours. This example shows that validation mechanisms should be part of a **broader lifelong learning strategy** in order to be successful. The Lifelong Learning Platform also believes this strategy should be designed in a **long-term perspective**. Indeed introducing and withdrawing policies damages the perception of individuals and strongly burdens the implementing bodies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Validation should be an **individual right**: everyone should be able to access validation arrangements. This implies to make the necessary legal and financial frameworks.
- Validation arrangements should be developed in a comprehensive way by being possible **in all sectors and levels of education and training**.
- Validation should not only aim to get a certificate but when this is the case the **diplomas/certificates should have the same value, acknowledgement and acceptance** as those delivered in the formal system.



Source: CEDEFOP, Briefing note "The validation challenge: how close is Europe to recognising all learning?", Nov. 2014, No 2, p. 1.

2. Overcoming resistance: towards a cultural shift

The implementation of validation mechanisms goes against strong beliefs in society that good education can only be delivered in a classroom especially when we consider higher education. **Changing mindsets** as regards non-formal and informal learning is a prerequisite in making progress in this area. This concerns formal education as well as employers. For example, the learning outcomes of volunteering are seldom recognised by employers whereas they could greatly increase (young) persons' chances in the labour market¹.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Raising awareness campaigns about validation** targeting both policy-makers and local stakeholders (employers, education and training institutions, etc.) is a first step towards changing mindsets. This necessitates cooperation mechanisms at local, regional and national levels in order to build trust and to reach the widest population as possible. These campaigns should also aim at developing self-awareness about one's skills. In order for validation systems to be successful, it is necessary for individuals to know they have skills to be validated.
- **Broad public debates** are essential. For now, validation systems are developed by specialists "behind closed doors" without a broad consultation of stakeholders. Civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders (including employers) should be involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of validation mechanisms but also in the definition and revision of standards to create a sense of ownership and to inform decision-makers about the implications and possible bottlenecks of the development of such mechanisms for the different sectors (See as example [Building Learning Societies Campaign](#)).

3. Reaching out to disadvantaged groups

The 2012 Council Recommendation on validation states that *"the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the **socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified.**"* Validation is both a means to reach out to a wider population by offering an alternative path and to integrate disadvantaged groups socially and economically.

¹ In the framework of the GR-EAT project (led by AEGEE), the LLLPlatform led a [survey](#) approaching employers on how they value volunteering in recruitment processes, June 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Give more emphasis on targeted measures** to raise awareness among and reach out to disadvantaged groups. This entails collecting data at the national level to assess the impact of current systems on targeted publics and adopting measures to make sure systems are adapted to learners' specific needs in terms of access, duration, etc.
- **Creating a sense of self-worth and self-confidence** in order to give genuine opportunities for second chances and to enhance motivation to learn should be financed as a priority. A focus on entrepreneurship and validation to support disadvantage people's own initiatives is essential.
- **The use of tests and examinations** is key in that respect. There is still resistance to use "untraditional" methods to validate non-formal and informal learning such as declarative methods, observations or simulations. Even the use of portfolios can be difficult for some of the target groups who do not have strong writing skills but may be performing very well in their work.

4. Guidance, counseling and information

Educational institutions should be **prepared and encouraged to implement** validation mechanisms. It is important to implement the validation strategies in a way that builds trust with learners and stakeholders. This entails presenting validation as a means to social inclusion, personal development, empowerment and employability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Quality guidance and counselling services** should raise awareness about validation opportunities and provide information to learners. The need to train the professionals dealing with validation directly or indirectly is essential for such mechanisms to deliver their potential impact. In order to increase outreach, non-traditional training providers should also be trained to offer quality guidance services.
- **The European Social Fund** could support such professional development activities and we would highly recommend that the **EQF AG monitor the use of the Funds** to support the implementation of the Recommendation.
- **Develop clear and learner-centred toolkits and guidance on validation** using less 'technical' terminology, to reach the widest possible audience. It is important to better explain the purpose of validation – as not only the tool for acquiring certificates and qualifications, but as a means to empower people and raise their self-awareness of the skills, competences and knowledge they possess.

5. The EU's role in a successful implementation of VNIL

The EU has had a **leading role** in the policy shift that led to the recognition of VNIL as a priority. On top of the 2012 Council Recommendation, the European Qualification Framework has had a major impact on developing learning outcomes oriented policies and putting in place national validation systems. Today, the EU should take advantage of its position to secure a successful implementation of VNIL across the continent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Further progress in data collection** remains crucial in the field of validation. The European Inventory on VNFIL update is an important first step. At national level, it is important to collect more evidence, based on a qualitative analysis on validation in order to help authorities and institutions to be less overcautious about developing validation mechanisms. The effective dissemination across the EU of good practices in the field is also essential to the good implementation of the 2012 Council Recommendation.
- **EU programmes** such as Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 and the European Structural Funds should provide opportunities to advance the setting up of national validation systems, favour peer learning and develop incentives for employers to recognise validation certificates. There should also be a strong link between validation and youth employment initiatives and validation should be mentioned in national **Youth Guarantee implementation plans**.
- **Improve the implementation Roadmap by splitting up the EQF Advisory Group countries into groups** with different timelines and speeds according to their situation as regards validation. Peer-learning activities based on the experience of countries would speed up the whole process.

WHO IS THE LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM?

The Lifelong Learning Platform is an umbrella association that gathers 39 European organisations active in the field of education and training, coming from all EU Member States and beyond. Currently these networks represent more than 50 000 educational institutions (schools, universities, adult education and youth centres, etc.) or associations (involving students, teachers and trainers, parents, HRD professionals, etc.) covering all sectors of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Their members reach out to several millions of beneficiaries.

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