

Common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning

This note presents a set of common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning. It is a final draft proposal dated Feb 19, 2004

1. BACKGROUND

This note presents a set of common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The proposal builds on the input and involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. An expert group was appointed by the Commission in February 2003 and has presented a number of drafts providing a basis for wider consultation and debate. Working group 'H' of the Objectives process ('Making learning attractive and strengthening links between education, work and society') has played a key-role in taking the principles forward. Consisting of representatives of all (31) involved countries, the European social partners, a range of civil society organisations and the Commission, this group has been instrumental in strengthening the overall relevance of the proposal. The Irish Presidency of the EU will raise the issue of common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the May 2004 meeting of the (Education) Council. The current proposal will be used as a basis for this initiative.

The principles should support a voluntary process leading towards more coherent and comparable validation practises in Europe. The main focus will be on the following areas of validation:

- Validation of learning taking place in formal education and training settings.
- Validation of learning taking place in relation to the labour market (enterprises, public organisations and economic sectors).
- Validation of learning taking place in relation to voluntary and civil society activities (exemplified by the activities of youth organisations) as well as in community learning (exemplified by Nordic adult liberal education).

Particular attention should be given to validation approaches aiming at the (re)integration of individuals into education and training, labour market and society at large (for example targeting the needs of school drop-outs, unemployed and immigrants). This purpose, present in all the three areas mentioned above, illustrates the crucial economic and social role to be played by validation of non-formal and informal learning.

2. WHY COMMON EUROPEAN PRINCIPLES?

The need for common guiding principles for validation have been stated repeatedly in recent years, most significantly in the Copenhagen declaration (November 2002) on increased European co-operation in vocational education and training. The 31 Ministers of Education and Training, the European social partners and the Commission stated that there is a need to

'...develop a set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels.' The Copenhagen agreement reflects the increasing political attention given to learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions. During the last couple of years, a number of initiatives have been taken at national and European level supporting the development of new approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning. In the Communication on Lifelong Learning (2001), 'Valuing Learning' is a main priority, emphasising the need for mutual learning in Europe. The same attention to non-formal and informal learning can be observed in the 2001 (Education) Council decision on 'Concrete future objectives for European education and training systems' and in the White Paper on Youth policies adopted by the Commission in 2001. Under the Objectives work programme, developing ways for the official validation of non-formal learning experiences has been identified as a key issue in making learning more attractive and relevant for the individual. This emphasis is repeated in the joint interim report of the European Council and Commission (February 2004) on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe ('Education and Training 2010'). This report states that

'...the development of common European references and principles can usefully support national policies. Although such common references and principles do not create obligation for Member States, they contribute to developing mutual trust between the key-players and encouraging reform.'

Referring to 'validation of non-formal and informal learning as one of the areas where such principles should be developed, the report states that

'...these principles should be developed as a matter of priority and implemented at national level, taking account of the national situation and respecting Member States competences.'

Developing a set of common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning is a way to bring added value to ongoing work at local, regional and national level. According to the Copenhagen declaration the main motivation for developing such principles is to strengthen the comparability (and thus compatibility) of approaches at different levels and in different contexts. Validation methods and systems developed so far have to a large extent been designed and set up in isolation from each other and can not easily be linked and combined. We can to a certain extent speak of a process where 'islands' of validation have been established but where the 'bridges' between these remain to be designed and built. Lack of comparability makes it difficult for individuals to realise lifelong learning by combining qualifications and competences acquired in different settings, at different levels and in different countries.

Generally speaking, common European principles must make it possible for different systems to communicate with each other, be this across national, sector or institutional borders. The Common principles for validation have to support and extend credit transfer system developed within formal education and training systems (notably the existing European Credit Transfer System developed for higher education, ECTS, and the credit transfer system currently being considered for vocational education and training).

3. COMMON EUROPEAN PRINCIPLES

A set of common European principles for validation will be organised according to six main themes; purpose of validation, individual entitlements, responsibilities of institutions and stakeholders, confidence and trust, impartiality and credibility and legitimacy.

The European principles should be used as a guide and common reference point for development and implementation of methods and systems for validation.

The European principles do not prescribe any particular methodological or institutional solutions as these must be tailored to local, regional, sectoral or national needs. The principles do, however, point to a set of basic requirements which have to be met if confidence, impartiality and credibility are to be achieved and retained.

3.1 THE PURPOSE OF VALIDATION

The overall aim of validation is to make visible and value the full range of qualifications and competences held by an individual, irrespective of where these have been acquired. The purpose of this validation may be formative (supporting an ongoing learning process) as well as summative (aiming at certification).

- Validation of learning outcomes, be they acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal setting, aims at making visible the full range of knowledge and competences held by an individual.
- Validation of learning outcomes supports lifelong learning, employability and active citizenship. Validation can facilitate progression in education and training, (re)integration in the labour market, geographical and occupational mobility as well as organisational and personal development.
- Validation of learning outcomes, irrespective of where these have been acquired, can serve summative purposes. By summative is meant validation resulting in formal recognition (for example through a certificate or diploma).
- Validation of learning outcomes, irrespective of where these have been acquired, can serve formative purposes. By formative is meant the process of identifying learning outcomes without formal recognition (for personal and/or career development). Formative validation may potentially provide the basis for formal recognition.

3.2 INDIVIDUAL ENTITLEMENTS

Validation of non-formal and informal learning must first and foremost serve the needs of individual citizens. This means that individual entitlements have to be clearly stated, in particular in relation to issues like privacy, ownership of validation results and right to appeal.

- Validation is as a general principle voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether it should take place or not.

- In cases where validation is part of a compulsory system measures should be put in place to ensure transparency, fairness and privacy.
- In private and public organisations where validation is compulsory this should be based on social dialogue.
- In the case of summative validation, individuals enjoy the right to appeal a validation result; this right should be presented in a transparent way at the start of the validation process.
- Special provisions should be designed for individuals with special needs to ensure equal (and fair) access to validation.
- The results of validation must be the property of the individual. Where the results of validation are kept by others the privacy of the individual must be ensured.

3.3 RESPONSIBILITIES OF INSTITUTIONS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Institutions and stakeholders (public organisations, private enterprises and voluntary organisations) face certain responsibilities when they initiate validation, for example in terms of providing proper guidance and support. These obligations will differ according to the specific field of activity.

Results of validation must be presented in such a way that they can be understood at European and international level. When possible, common European instruments and formats like the European CV and the Europass framework for transparency of qualifications and competences should be used.

- The privacy of the individual must be respected.
- Validation should be supported by information, guidance and counselling services.
- Education and training systems should provide a legal and practical basis enabling individuals to have their learning validated.
- Enterprises, public organisations and economic sectors should provide a practical basis enabling individuals to have their learning validated.
- Validation should be an integral part of human resource development in enterprises and public organisations and should be based on social dialogue.
- Non-formal learning organisations outside formal education and training systems should provide a basis enabling individuals to have their learning validated.

3.4. CONFIDENCE AND TRUST

Confidence is a necessary pre-requisite for successful development and implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Everybody involved must be able to make his or her own informed judgements of the approach in question. This requires well-defined standards; clear information on how assessments are conducted and on which basis conclusions are drawn; clear information about the purpose of validation and how the results will be used; and, clear and accessible information on conditions for validation, for example time and cost involved as well as support/guidance provided.

Transparency of procedures

- The validation process must give confidence to all concerned that the named person/candidate actually has acquired the knowledge and competences in question (validity must be ensured).
- Validation schemes must be designed in such a way that potential users, be they individuals or institutions, are able to observe and judge the entire validation process.
- The basis (methodologies) for validation should be stated clearly (written exams, interviews, practical tests, self assessments, descriptive methodologies, involvement in a specific field of activity, others).
- Clear information on time and cost should be presented.

Transparency of criteria

- The requirements to be met by the individual must be clearly described so as to facilitate reliability (two validation bodies acting independently must be expected to reach the same conclusions).
- The criteria used by 'assessors' when 'weighting' ('marking') learning outcomes must be as clear as possible.

Availability of, and access to, information

- The purpose, criteria and requirements for validation (points of reference, standards) as well as the use of results must be presented in such a way that they are transparent to all involved, including the individual being validated.

3.5 IMPARTIALITY

Impartiality is a crucial feature of validation and relates to the roles and responsibilities of the assessors involved in the validation process. It is important to avoid undue mixing of roles as this will negatively affect overall confidence and trust to validation results. Impartiality can be strengthened through training and systematic networking, something that needs to be promoted by validation providers.

- Assessors should, in particular in relation to summative validation, operate according to a code of conduct and not combine incompatible roles in a way that compromises confidentiality and impartiality.
- Assessors must be professionally competent and have access to systematic initial and continuing training. Where possible local, regional and national networks of assessors should be set up to assure professional development and coherent practices.

3.6 CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY

Credibility and legitimacy must be based on the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders at all appropriate levels. The social and professional credibility of validation reflects the inclusion and commitment of relevant stakeholders. Credibility is also closely linked to the (above) issues of confidence and impartiality.

- The development, implementation and financing of a mechanism for validation must involve all relevant stakeholders (for example, involving social partners in cases where work experience is being assessed or NGOs in cases where voluntary and civil society activities are being assessed).
- Validation bodies need to be impartial and shall involve all stakeholders significantly concerned without any interest predominating. The system of validation, at all levels of operation, should be organised to safeguard impartiality and enable participation from all parties involved.

4. FOLLOW UP

A set of common European principles on validation of non-formal and informal learning will be supported by a systematic monitoring and evaluation of initiatives at all levels. The European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, introduced by the Communication on lifelong learning in 2001, will play a crucial role in this respect. The purpose of the European Inventory is to support systematic exchange of experiences and strengthen mutual learning. The European Inventory will provide support to the different stakeholders, making it possible to develop high quality validation approaches.

Particular attention should be given to the future use of the Europass framework for transparency of qualifications and competences. As indicated in 2.3, the Europass instruments and formats should be used actively and systematically to support European and international comparability and coherence. How the Europass national bodies (to be introduced from 2005) can support developments in the field of validation must also be considered.

Annex GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

assessment (of competences)

The sum of methods and processes used to evaluate the attainments (knowledge, know-how and/or competences) of an individual, and typically leading to certification.

Source: Cedefop, 2003.

awarding body

A body issuing qualifications (certificates or diplomas) formally recognising the achievements of an individual, following a standard assessment procedure.

Source: Cedefop, 2003 adapted from OECD.

certificate / diploma

An official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievements of an individual following a standard assessment procedure.

Source: Cedefop, 2002.

certification (of competences)

The process of formally validating knowledge, know-how and/or competences acquired by an individual, following a standard assessment procedure. Certificates or diplomas are issued by accredited awarding bodies.

Comment: certification validates the outcome of either formal learning (training actions) or informal / non-formal learning.

Source: Cedefop, 2002.

civil society

A 'third sector' of society beside the State and the market, embracing institutions, groups and associations (either structured or informal), which may act as mediator between citizens and public authorities.

Source: Cedefop, 2001 in European Commission, communication Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality, doc. COM(2001) 678 final.

comparability (of qualifications)

The extent to which it is possible to establish equivalence between the level and content of formal qualifications (certificates or diplomas) at sectoral, regional, national or international levels.

Source: Cedefop, 2000.

competence

Ability to apply knowledge, know-how and skills in an habitual and/or changing work situation.

Source: Cedefop, 2002.

continuing vocational education and training

Education or training after initial education or entry into working life, aimed at helping individuals to:

- improve or update their knowledge and/or competences;
- acquire new competences for a career move or retraining;
- continue their personal or professional development.

Source: Cedefop, 2002

dropout

Withdrawal from attending education or training resulting in a failure to meet the course objectives.

Comment:

(a) this term designates both the process (early school leaving) and the persons (early school leavers) who fail to complete a course;

(b) besides early school leavers, dropouts may also include learners who have completed education or training but failed the examinations.

Source: adapted from The international encyclopaedia of education

employability

The degree of adaptability an individual demonstrates in finding and keeping a job, and updating occupational competences.

Source: Cedefop, 2000.

formal learning

Learning that occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to certification.

Source: Cedefop, 2003.

guidance and counselling

A range of activities designed to help individuals take (educational, vocational, personal) decisions and to carry them out before and after they enter the labour market.

Source: Cedefop, 2003

informal learning

Learning resulting from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from

the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

initial vocational education and training

Either general or vocational education carried out in the initial education system, in principle before entering working life.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

learning

A cumulative process whereby individuals gradually assimilate increasingly complex and abstract entities (concepts, categories, and patterns of behaviour or models) and/or acquire skills and competences.
Source: adapted from Lave, 1997.

learning outcome(s) / learning attainments

The set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

lifelong learning

All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills/competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

non-formal learning

Learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

prior learning

The knowledge, know-how and/or competences acquired through previously unrecognised training or experience.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

qualification

(a) An official record (certificate, diploma) of achievement which recognises successful completion of education or training, or satisfactory performance in a test or examination;
and/or
(b) the requirements for an individual to enter, or progress within an occupation.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

recognition (of competences)

(a) Formal recognition: the process of granting official status to competences, either
- through the award of certificates or
- through the grant of equivalence, credit units, validation of gained competences;
and/or
(b) social recognition: through acknowledgment of the value of competences by economic and social stakeholders.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

social dialogue

A process of exchange between social partners to promote consultation, dialogue and collective bargaining.

Comment:

(a) social dialogue can be bipartite (involving representatives of workers and employers) or tripartite (also associating public authorities and/or representatives of civil society, NGOs, etc.);
(b) social dialogue can take place at various levels (company, sectoral/cross-sectoral and local/regional/national/transnational);
(c) at international level, social dialogue can be bilateral, trilateral or multilateral, according to the number of countries involved.
Source: Cedefop, 2003.

social inclusion

Integration of individuals -or groups of individuals- into the social spheres of society, as citizens or members of different 'public' social networks. Social inclusion is fundamentally rooted in labour market or economic inclusion.

Source: Cedefop, 2003.

transparency (of qualifications)

The degree of intelligibility of qualifications allowing their value to be identified and compared on the (sectoral, regional, national or international) labour and training markets.

Source: Cedefop, 2003.

validation of informal / non-formal learning

The process of assessing and recognising a wide range of knowledge, know-how, skills and competences which people develop throughout their lives in different contexts, for example through education, work and leisure activities.

Source: adapted from The international encyclopaedia of education.

valuing learning

The process of promoting participation in and outcomes of (formal or non-formal) learning, to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward learning.

Source: Cedefop, 2001 in European Commission, communication Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality, doc. COM(2001) 678 final.

vocational education and training (VET)

Education and training which aims to equip people with skills and competences that can be used on the labour market.

Source: adapted from ETF, 1997.