



European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

Thematic report: validation and
early school leavers

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Cite this report as:

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2014).
*European inventory on validation of non-formal and
informal learning 2014. Thematic report: validations and
early school leavers.*
<http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2014/87238.pdf>.

In partnership with
 **CEDEFOP**
European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

A project carried out by

ICF
INTERNATIONAL

Education
and Culture

A report submitted by [ICF Consulting Services](#)

Date: September 2014

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1 Introduction

This thematic report forms part of the 2014 update to the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (the European Inventory). The updated European Inventory is made up of the following outputs, which together form a 'snapshot' of the state of play in relation to validation of non-formal and informal learning (validation) in Europe:

- Country updates covering 33 European countries¹;
- 2 case studies providing examples of validation 'in practice';
- Eight thematic reports (of which this report is one); and
- A final synthesis report identifying overall findings from the project.

The thematic reports are intended to provide more detail in relation to a number of subjects of central interest to policy makers and practitioners. Using the 2014 country updates and case studies, as well as the results of an online survey carried out between 3 October 2013 - 11 November 2013 and other literature relating to the topic of validation of non-formal and informal learning, these reports aim to identify and analyse key issues and trends, as well as examples of good practice and lessons learned in relation to a specific aspect of validation. They are intended for use by stakeholders in the field of validation.

This thematic report on the use of validation for early school leaving (ESL) is structured according to the following headings:

- Context
- Validation and ESL – current state-of-play
- Conclusions

2 Context

2.1 European Policies on Early School Leaving and Validation

In 2013, more than one in ten young people in the EU left school without having completed upper secondary education. This lack of formal education has significant potential consequences for their future employability and gives them a higher risk of social exclusion in later life. At the same time, it creates a cost for society in implementing measures to address the cumulative social and economic costs which arise from school drop-out².

Tackling early school leaving (ESL) has thus become a major policy priority in Europe. Most recently, in June 2011, a Council Recommendationⁱ was issued on policies to reduce early school leaving, which called on Member States to ensure they have comprehensive ESL strategies in place by the end of 2012. It also asked the European Commission to facilitate the exchange of experience and good practice, as well as effective peer learning, networking and experimentation, in order to support Member States' strategies.

In the EU's growth strategy 'Europe 2020'ⁱⁱ a headline target was set to reduce ESL to 10 % by 2020. A commitment was also set out to promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, as part of the flagship initiative 'Youth on the Move', which aims to enhance the performance of education systems and to facilitate the entry of young people to the labour market.

The Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning is also the subject of a Council Recommendationⁱⁱⁱ, issued in December 2012. The Recommendation notes that *"disadvantaged groups, including individuals who are unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, are particularly likely to benefit from the validation arrangements, since validation can increase their participation in lifelong learning and their access to the labour market"*. Since ESLs are more likely to be unemployed than their peers (in 2012, 40.1% of

¹ There are 36 country updates in total, as two reports have been prepared for Belgium and three for the UK, in order to take account of the devolved responsibility for education and training policy in these countries.

² For a more detailed discussion, see Nevala, Anne-Mari, Hawley, Jo et al. (2011) *Reducing early school leaving in the EU*. Brussels: European Parliament.

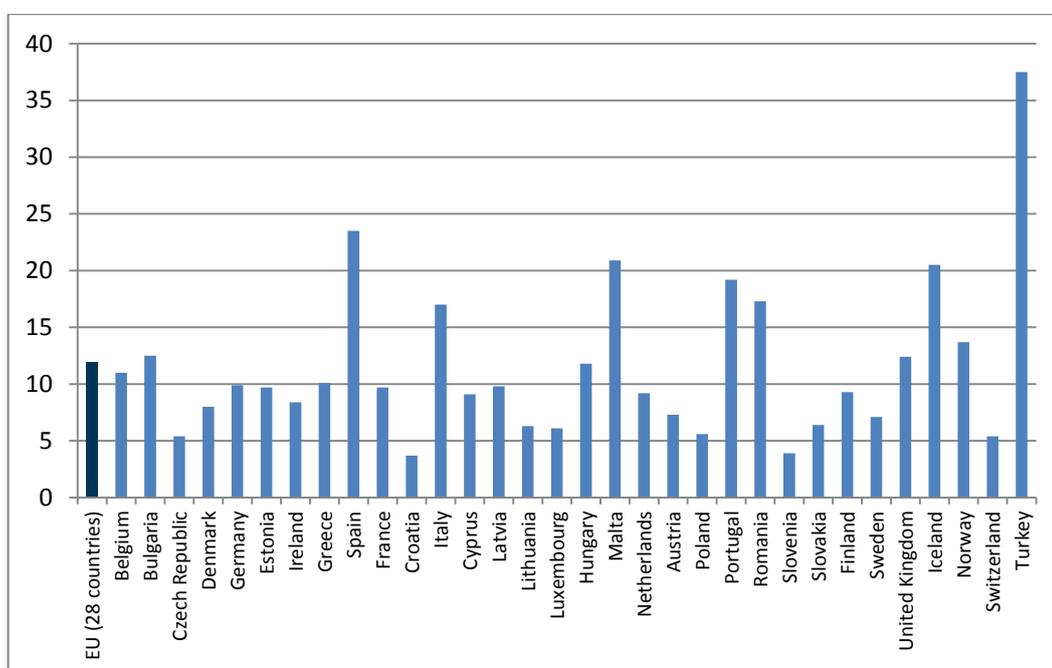
ESLs were unemployed, compared to an overall unemployment rate amongst young people under the age of 25 of 22.8% across the EU³) and since low levels of education have an impact on a young person's employability (9 out of 10 new jobs in Europe require medium or high level qualifications, making it increasingly important for young people to acquire higher level qualifications^{iv}), they fall within this at-risk group who may be particularly likely to benefit from validation arrangements.

2.2 Early school leaving in Europe – an overview

'Early school leavers' (ESLs) are defined at EU level as 18-24 year-olds with at most lower secondary level education who have not progressed to any further education or training⁴. In 2013, the rate of early school leaving in the EU-28 was 11.9 %. This represents a decrease on previous years (there has been a continued decrease in past years, with the rate in 2003 at 16.4 %) but the 2013 rate was still higher than the target set out in the Europe 2020 Strategy, of 10 %.

Moreover, ESL rates across Europe vary considerably, from a low of 3.7 % in Croatia in 2013, to the highest rate in Turkey, at 37.5 %, as shown in Figure 2.1, below.

Figure 2.1 Early school leaving in Europe, 2013



Source: Eurostat. Data extracted May 2014

ESLs are not a homogeneous group and have wide-ranging needs depending on their individual background and circumstances. The lead-up to school drop-out tends to be a cumulative process of disengagement, triggered by issues which are both internal and external to the educational environment. The reasons can seem relatively simple, for example to take up a job offer or help run the family business, or much more complex, relating to their course of study, the school, or to health, personal, or emotional difficulties for instance. Thus the needs of ESLs in terms of support to return to a learning environment and / or acquire certification to evidence their skills also vary considerably.

³ European Commission (2013). Reducing early school leaving: key messages and policy support. Final report of the Thematic working group on early school leaving.

⁴ The Eurostat definition refers to "persons aged 18 to 24 fulfilling the following two conditions: first, the highest level of education or training attained is ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short, second, respondents declared not having received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey (numerator)".

Although ESLs may not have acquired recognised certificates to document a formal education, many have acquired skills through other activities such as:

- Work experience,
- In the home (e.g. if they have caring responsibilities),
- Hobbies or volunteering,
- Non-formal learning opportunities^v.

Thus although validation has often been seen as a tool to support adults who have accumulated knowledge and skills, in particular through work experience, it also has potential as a mechanism to enable ESLs to find a route back into education, towards employment and / or to acquire a (higher-level) qualification.

2.3 The relevance of validation practices for early school leavers

Validation practices form part of a wider range of education and social policy instruments to support ESLs. Many ESLs will have negative experiences or perceptions of formal education, yet as explained above, have acquired skills through their personal and / or work experiences. Validation practices therefore provide individuals with a range of opportunities to have their skills recognised (perhaps in the form of credits, exemptions or a full qualification), or can simply be a way of helping them to formulate a learning / career pathway for the future.

Summative validation methods (which enable the individual to acquire a formal qualification as recognition of his /her skills and competences) can thus provide a means of recognising skills that ESLs may have acquired outside of the formal learning environment, in the form of a qualification, a credit or unit towards a qualification, an exemption, or access to a formal learning opportunity. It can therefore provide a route back into learning. For young people who may never have acquired a qualification in the past, the opportunity to earn 'bite-sized' units of learning (for example through validation which is linked to the award of credits via a national qualifications framework) can present an achievement which gives them the motivation to continue further towards a full qualification. Shortened study periods, resulting from exemptions, can also be a motivating factor to take up the opportunity to acquire a qualification in full.

Formative validation (which enables the individual to learn about the skills and competences he / she already possesses and to use this knowledge as a basis for future learning or career pathways) can also provide a route back into learning, or at least a personal plan towards further learning or employment. This type of validation might be more suitable for ESLs who face more complex issues. For some young people, a validation process may be the first chance they have to identify and understand the value of the skills they possess. One-to-one support to identify the skills they have acquired outside of formal education may lead to a confidence-boost which is the first stepping stone towards a return to formal learning. Alternatively, it may help the young person to understand how to present their skills and competences to employers in job applications or interviews.

The distinction between summative and formative validation described above provides a helpful overview of the relevance of validation practices according to the needs and personal circumstances of the individual. It highlights for example specific validation practices that may be more helpful to the younger segment of the 18-24 ESL age group, who may require more psycho-social support to help increase self-esteem and or self-awareness. It also serves to highlight the relevance of validation for the older segment of the 18-24 ESL age group and beyond in the form of second chance opportunities for example.

A recent report produced for Unesco on recognition of prior learning and early school leavers^{vi} groups the potential benefits of validation into three main types:

- Personal benefits such as increased self-esteem and self-awareness, which can empower a young person to embark on a professional / personal project;
- Learning-related benefits, through for example the opportunity to find tailor-made training to supplement existing identified competences; a stimulus to engagement in formal learning and further non-formal learning; and access to a previously inaccessible level of study.

- Labour market-related benefits (when the recognition of prior learning is linked to the achievement of recognised qualifications), including for example helping the young person to get a job, or to become more ‘flexible’ on the labour market (for example because of increased awareness of their own abilities, by giving them evidence to apply for another job or promotion).

Validation can therefore present an opportunity to promote greater equality of opportunity, by recognising that skills acquired outside of the formal education environment can be of equal value to those acquired through formal learning, and by creating opportunities for those who have not maximised the benefits from initial formal education to access further learning and/or work.

3 Validation and ESL – current state-of-play

3.1 Introduction

The following section will provide an overview of the types of validation practices that are available to ESLs across the countries covered by the European Inventory, presenting examples of specific initiatives identified through our research that may be of relevance and value to ESLs.

Our review of the country reports has not identified a significant number of projects which are targeted *specifically* at ESLs. In addition, in our survey of validation practices, ESLs were (one of) the target group(s) for only 8 out of 42 projects.

It should nevertheless be noted that ESLs may be eligible for or fall within the priority target groups for other validation initiatives covered by the Inventory, but not be their sole target group. For example, a number of initiatives cover the low skilled but over a broader age range. There are also initiatives aimed at young people, but not necessarily those who have left school early. Based on the evidence collected through the 2014 Inventory, each of the following sections therefore describes both initiatives which are available (but not exclusively) to ESLs and those which are targeted specifically at ESLs. The initiatives have been grouped together with others which take a similar approach, but it is worth noting that the categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, a skills audit/portfolio approach might lead to the creation of a tailored learning opportunity, or a second chance learning opportunity might be used to prepare a learner for an external examination.

3.2 National laws, policies and strategies

In a small number of countries, the national policy or strategy to tackle ESL includes/has included reference to validation as a tool to support the strategy’s aims and objectives. Countries where this is the case include Finland, the Netherlands and Spain:

- In **Finland** for example, the Ministry of Education and Culture launched a national programme to prevent drop-out and enhance the pass-rate in IVET (Läpäisyn Tehostamisohjelma 2011-2014). The overall budget for 2011-2014 was EUR 16 million. One of the main activities supported by the programme is the improvement of validation of non-formal and informal learning in order to shorten study times. IVET providers are able to apply for project-based funding to develop their activities. Several national IVET provider networks have carried out projects funded by the programme and they have, among other things, developed more systematic approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- In the **Netherlands**, a target was set in the ‘Drive to reduce drop-out rates’ (aanval op schooluitval) policy framework for 20,000 early school leavers aged 18-23 to have the opportunity to have the skills, experiences and competencies they acquired through work validated. This initiative is targeted at young people who do not have basic qualifications but who are active in the labour market^{vii}.
- In **Spain**, the 2010-2011 National Action Plan to reduce ESL promoted the use of validation of non-formal learning by the competent authorities^{viii}.

When it comes to specific validation policies and initiatives, only one example identified in the country updates prioritises ESLs. This is **Portugal**, where a new network of validation centres has recently been authorised, called CQEP (Centros para a Qualificação e Ensino Profissional / Centres for Qualification and Vocational Training). These Centres will provide RVCC (leading to qualifications at basic and secondary level) to adults aged between 18 and 23, who have at least three years of professional or certified experience.

In both **Latvia** and **Romania**, validation is referred to in a wider national policy (the Latvian Guidelines for Lifelong Learning) or law (the Romanian Law on National Education) on education / lifelong learning and ESLs are included as one of the key target groups, alongside others such as the low-qualified/low-skilled (Latvia and Romania), graduates with skills which are no longer relevant on the labour market (Romania), pensioners (Latvia) and young people and adults returning to the country after a period working abroad (Romania), among others.

Validation may also be identified as part of policies aiming to tackle unemployment amongst young people, including early school leavers. For example in **France**, the use of Validation of Experience (*Validation des acquis de l'expérience, VAE*) is being promoted as part of the flagship initiative launched in 2012 by the government to support (low-skilled) young people facing difficulties to access the labour market, the subsidised jobs programme (*Emplois d'Avenir*)^{ix}. Participants in this nationwide scheme (co-funded by the State) undertake different types of training activities during their work contract; in addition to formal training, this experience offers a broad range of opportunities for informal and non-formal learning. Participants are supported individually by a counsellor who monitors their individual development. Counsellors should advise young people on how to use VAE at the end of their contract to get their learning outcomes formally recognised and improve their employment prospects. The government's target is to enrol 150 000 young people as part of the scheme by 2014 (although no target has been defined concerning the number of VAE applications following participation in the scheme).

In the **Netherlands** too, a temporary measure taken by the government in 2009 supports jobseekers to access validation (known as 'EVC'). Employers who need to make redundancies because of the economic crisis can offer the employees concerned an EVC procedure. The scheme is targeted at three different specific groups, one of which is young unemployed persons without a starting qualification (a level 2 vocational qualification). The cost of this procedure is subsidised by the employment agencies.

In other countries, ESLs may fall under another priority group identified in national policies, strategies or initiatives, such as those intended to upskill the adult population, or to reduce unemployment amongst young people. In many countries, validation is recognised as a method of supporting the low-qualified to return to education/ training, gain a qualification in recognition of their skills / competences, or map out a pathway to return to education or work. In **France** again, it is said that the purpose of the validation system is to give the opportunity to those who have no qualification but have professional experience and skills to get a first level of qualification, and more generally to improve the level of qualification of all the users.

Whilst in some countries, validation opportunities for low-qualified adults are targeted at older individuals and therefore not available to ESLs (e.g. university access examinations in **Spain** are for individuals aged over 25 and in **Norway**, adults over the age of 25 have a right to complete their compulsory education), in other countries older ESLs may fall under a priority to target low-qualified / low-skilled adults. For example in **Estonia**, the Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009-2013 set out the following objective: "*Opportunities to obtain secondary education without completing the required level of basic education will be created for people without basic education (for people aged 22+ in general education and for people aged 20+ in vocational education)*". This objective has been fulfilled and there are now special programmes in VET designed for adults who have not yet achieved secondary level education, to enable them to do so. In Sweden, the low-skilled/low-qualified in general (i.e. without specifying certain age parameters) are also a priority group.

There are also numerous examples of specific projects which focus on adults with low levels of qualifications, but over a broader age range than the European definition of ESLs. Our survey of practices for example found that 12 of the 42 projects which responded targeted

the low-qualified. Some of these are listed below (more detail can be found in the relevant Inventory 2014 country reports):

- In **Austria**, the 'Kompetenz mit System' (KmS) measure is open to unemployed people⁵ and jobseekers who have completed compulsory schooling at the most. The measure, which is run by the national public employment service (AMS), offers non-formal courses to enable jobseekers to acquire the competences they need to pass the final apprenticeship examination. More detail can be found in the Inventory 2014 case study on this initiative.
- Another **Austrian** example is the 'You have skills/competences' pilot initiative, which targets persons with low qualifications and immigrants: semi-skilled workers who want to improve their skills and secure employment through the acquisition of an apprenticeship certificate.
- In **Denmark**, the 'From unskilled to skilled in no time' ('Fra ufaglært til faglært på rekordtid') project is a significant educational initiative and one of its main purposes is to improve the skills of the workforce to a level that matches the needs of both companies and society. The project responds to the expected increase in unemployment among the unskilled and the future shortage of skilled labour in the capital region.

3.3 Validation opportunities targeted at young people

The 2014 country updates identified a number of validation projects which focus on young people, although not specifically ESLs. This is because some validation projects for young people might not necessarily reach certain ESLs, since they focus on young people who are involved in extra-curricular opportunities (e.g. sporting activities, groups such as scouts or guides), which may not be accessed by those ESLs who have low levels of engagement with formal education or the community. Other opportunities recognise that validation also has the potential to support young people with low levels of qualifications.

Examples of validation initiatives targeted at young people (but not specifically ESLs) include the following:

- In **Malta**, within the compulsory education sector, the validation of Informal Education activities are governed by regulations set by the Directorate for Standards and Quality in Education and the NCFHE^x. A secondary school certificate and profile was introduced in September 2010, which recognises all forms of learning undertaken during the five years of secondary education. This gives credit to formal education as well as to non-formal education received throughout the previous five years^{xi}. This certificate, which has been pegged at either a level 1 or a level 2 qualification on the national qualifications framework, therefore ensures that learners are given credit for all learning that takes place and is expected to ultimately support individuals to progress into further and higher education.
- Scouts of **Scotland** has undertaken work to map young people's learning from their scouting activities against the curriculum of the formal education system and is now actively supporting its volunteers so that they can develop local partnerships with schools to put this into practice. For example, Armadale Academy in West Lothian worked with Explorer Scouts and other young people undertaking volunteer leadership in their community, by offering them the chance to gain the new SQA Leadership Award. By supporting the Young Leaders and recognising the volunteering they were already doing, the school helped a number of its pupils to gain an additional qualification.
- In **Germany**, the 'Nachweise International' documents the participation (Certificate of Participation International), engagement (Certificate of Engagement International) and competences (Certificate of Competence International) acquired in international youth work projects^{xii}. It gives testimony in detailed form to individually demonstrated competences, which have been worked out in an especially developed procedure of certification.

These examples illustrate the strong potential of validation to enable young people to gain recognition for activities they undertake outside of the formal education environment and to

⁵ This covers only those registered at the Austrian public employment service, AMS.

give these a 'currency' on the labour market or to support further education plans, etc. However, as mentioned above, they may not be relevant to early school leavers, particularly those who drop out of school for complex reasons associated with their personal circumstances/background, since these young people are likely to have fewer opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities such as sport, volunteering etc.

Thus there is a need for validation opportunities which reduce, rather than widen, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged young people^{xiii}. One example of such a measure is the 'C-Sticks' initiative which was developed in **Belgium-Flanders** by the youth organisation 'Jes'. This organisation guides young people who do not easily find their way in society, including early school leavers. A lot of time used to be spent on their search for work and drafting a CV. The C-stick automatically generates CVs on the basis of the young person's experiences and for each application, the young person can make a relevant section of what they would like to include in their CV. The C-Stick also includes a set of techniques for the identification of competences and competence development, with the core elements: observation of competences, feedback, group dynamics, peer learning and experiential learning^{xiv}.

Another example of a validation opportunity which has been directed specifically at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with low qualification levels, is the study commissioned by Education **Scotland** to look at the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for young people from a looked-after background, which is described in the box below. It shows that validation has the potential not only to support further educational achievement but also to support the wider well-being of the individual concerned. Taking account of the profile of the target group, the toolkit used in the study focused on skills obtained in everyday life, through day-to-day activities, rather than traditional opportunities for extra-curricular activity, such as ballet lessons or sport, which tend to be encouraged within a nurturing family environment.

RPL for Young People from a looked-after background^{xv}

Education Scotland commissioned a small study to test out an application of RPL for young people from a looked-after background⁶. It was based on the principle that although many looked-after children leave school with few or no formal qualifications, these same young people often have full and varied life experiences. These experiences may have led to a set of wider achievements that could be recognised by an RPL process.

The study included a pilot project and a research evaluation. The work was carried out by the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) between January and June 2012, with additional expertise and training provided by the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development (LEAD) team at Glasgow Caledonian University.

An existing RPL profiling toolkit⁷ (the MSMF toolkit, described in more detail later in this report) was used in the pilot project. Professionals were recruited from West Lothian and East Renfrewshire local authorities, and received training to become mentors, or 'advisors', for looked after young people who are at risk of leaving school with few or no qualifications. Advisors came from a range of professional backgrounds.

The toolkit used in this study is presented as a brightly coloured, tactile and user friendly folder, containing a total of 34 'about me' cards list skills associated with common activities, e.g. caring for others and work experience. The RPL process involved the following steps:

- In Step 1, called 'About Me', participants were invited by an advisor to choose two or three cards which represent their interests.
- In the next stage of the profiling, called 'Think About It', participants choose one activity, and,

⁶ Thirteen advisors and 13 young people gave their consent to take part in the pilot and research evaluation. Of these, eight advisors and 12 young people went through profiling. All eight of the advisors and eight of the young people contributed to the research evaluation.

⁷ First developed in 2008/09, designed to benchmark skills obtained carrying out non-academic activities, such as caring for relatives or work experience, in order to assist them in their career planning journey. Further developed in 2010 and the resulting version was used for this study.

along with the advisor, benchmark the highlighted skills against the SCQF level descriptors, which are written in easy-to-understand language.

- The final stage of the profiling is to complete the 'Skills Profile'. This is a card that the young person can take away to use as tangible proof of their achievements, and details the approximate SCQF^{xvi} level on the front, and the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes on the back.

Young people worked with the advisors, using the toolkit in a one-to-one setting to determine their skill areas, and to benchmark their skills against the relevant SCQF level. All of the interviewed advisors reported good young person engagement with the process, especially in using the About Me Cards. Five of the advisors observed an increase in self-esteem. All of the advisors interviewed reported increased awareness of skills. Many of the young people were unaware that activities that they undertook in everyday life were skills, and were pleased to learn that they were. Three advisors saw the final profile as having some merit in its own right. It was felt that it could be used to support transition, or to show later professionals what the young person was capable of. All of the advisors interviewed felt that the young people would like to progress what they had learned about themselves on some level.

Benefits of RPL profiling for many of the young people included:

- engagement with process;
- increased skills awareness;
- increased self-awareness;
- feelings of being nurtured;
- recognition of skills;
- increased self-esteem;
- increased motivation and ambition.

Advisors reported that increased awareness of career options occurred more than increased awareness of opportunities during RPL profiling.

The toolkit was seen as an excellent tool to engage with looked-after children. It was seen as a good introduction tool, to put both advisors and young people at ease, and one advisor made the suggestion that the tool could be used to compare a before and after skill level for a young person who was about to build on previous experience, for example while engaging in an activity agreement. However concern was expressed that benefits could be short-lived. One advisor noted that the young person had experienced an initial boost in confidence, but was still out of work two weeks later, and so had come crashing down. This advisor's fears echo the sentiments of an earlier study^{xvii} (Newman & Blackburn, 2002), which warned that the building of self-esteem should come from the development of skills, rather than positive affirmation and praise. While RPL does offer skill recognition, it is therefore important that continued support is offered to the young people.

Nevertheless, the study suggested that RPL has potential as a resilience-enhancing tool. Looked-after children, in common with many other children with unstable pasts, are often not 'resilient', i.e. able to overcome the effects of adversity. According to the study, many of the factors which contribute to resilience and success are possible benefits of RPL profiling.

As noted above, 'Early school leavers' are defined at EU level as 18-24 year-olds with at most lower secondary level education who have not progressed to any further education or training⁸. The relevance of summative validation for this target group increases the older the individual is, partly because ageing entails more experiences of possible relevance for any kind of validation procedure. For ESLs who wish to return to education to acquire or complete qualifications, alternative learning environments or approaches tend to be more appropriate. Adult education methods of teaching and learning are for example more suited to older learners wishing to access 'second chance' opportunities to acquire formal qualifications. Validation can be used to support second chance learning opportunities in two ways – firstly at the point of access, to ensure tailored learning provision for each individual,

⁸ The Eurostat definition refers to "persons aged 18 to 24 fulfilling the following two conditions: first, the highest level of education or training attained is ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short, second, respondents declared not having received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey (numerator)".

and secondly for the award of (partial) qualifications, credits or modules, to ensure that learners can gain recognition for the skills they already have.

3.4 Tests and examinations

In a number of countries, learners are able to acquire a formal qualification by directly entering the final examination for the qualification concerned, without having to take part in a formal training opportunity. These 'external examinations' are generally not targeted specifically at early school leavers (although the focus is on the low-qualified, none of the examples identified below set an age restriction which matches the EU definition of ESLs), but may nevertheless be open to ESLs. The examinations tend to relate to either general secondary education or VET. They may be particularly relevant to those ESLs who left school to take up an employment opportunity and have acquired skills in the workplace which they would like to be recognised through a formal qualification. This particular group of ESLs has a greater need to access the assessment and certification phases of validation, rather than the preceding phases of identification and documentation.

Access to general secondary qualifications via 'external' examinations is possible in the following countries:

- **Austria:** The ExternistInnenreifeprüfung allows external candidates to sit for the Reifeprüfung exam (upper secondary school leaving exam providing direct access to HE) or examinations on individual subjects or school years. In addition, some lower secondary schools in a particular school district give an external exam that allows the retaking of exams to obtain Hauptschule qualifications within the framework of the lower secondary school-leaving certificate (i.e. not requiring prior school attendance).
- **Belgium-NL:** for a selection of educational programmes offered in secondary education, it is possible to obtain the diploma or certificate of secondary education at a later stage by taking an exam at the 'Exam Committee'.
- **Latvia:** The Law on Education⁹ states that anybody is able to validate independent learning by passing the examinations at any of the educational institutions providing a relevant study programme (at elementary or general secondary level). Accordingly, the Cabinet of Ministers issued in February 2012 Regulation no.149¹⁰ regarding the 'Procedures for Enrolment of Students in and Discharge from General Educational Institutions and the Mandatory Requirements for Moving Them up into the Next Grade'. This regulation states that the educational institution is allowed to accept a student as an external student (a person who develops the knowledge and skills as required by the state general educational standard and who passes the examinations for assessment or acquires the educational certificate).
- **Poland:** Exams carried out by the Central and Regional Examination Boards can be taken without the need for prior formal education. These examinations can be used to acquire the matura (upper secondary – ISCED level 3) certificate, graduation certificates (on ISCED 1-3) from schools providing education to adults and vocational qualifications for occupations that are included in the classification of vocational occupations (ISCED level 3). The extra-mural examinations offered to adults wishing to acquire certificates on ISCED 1-3 following participation in adult education can be considered as one of the key elements of the country's developing system of validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, as there is no requirement to attend school in order to attain the certificate.¹¹
- **Switzerland:** Where it is possible to take the final baccalaureate examination without having attended formal training.

⁹ Law on Education, adopted by Parliament on October 29, 1998, revised 01.09.2013 (Latvian: Izglītības likums) <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=50759>

¹⁰ Regulation no. 149 "Regarding the Procedures for Enrolment of Students in and Discharge from General Educational Institutions and the Mandatory Requirements for Moving Them up into the Next Grade", adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers on February 28, 2012, (Latvian: Noteikumi par kārtību, kādā izglītojamie tiek uzņemti vispārējās izglītības iestādēs un atskaitīti no tām, un obligātajām prasībām pārcelšanai uz nākamo klasi) <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=245006>

¹¹ Regulation of the Minister of Education of 11 January 2012 on extra-mural exam (Journal of Laws 2012 item 188).

Vocational qualifications can be acquired in this manner in:

- **Austria:** The 'Exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination' (Außerordentlicher Zugang zur Lehrabschlussprüfung) allows people over the age of 18 without formal training to take the final apprenticeship examination. The *Berufsaufstiegsprüfung (BRP)*, special VET diploma) provides general access to higher education and grants the right to study in all disciplines at post-secondary and tertiary educational institutions without the *Reifeprüfung* exam. In principle, this exam can be taken without prior attendance at upper secondary schools.
- **Bulgaria:** Article 40 of the Vocational education and training Act (VET Act) grants the opportunity for validation of non-formal and informal learning to those who have passed practical training with a duration determined by the educating institution, or have trained for a professional qualification for at least six months (by ministries, municipalities, employer and employee representatives, individual employers or through individual work). The qualification is acquired after passing the national examinations in Theory and Practice of Profession.
- **Croatia:** The Trades and Crafts Act (2013) defines a process of validating informal learning in relation to crafts occupations: 'For the purpose of running some associated crafts businesses for which adequate qualifications are required, an examination for evidencing necessary competences is taken in accordance with the programme prescribed by the Minister of Crafts, Small and Medium Enterprises upon the proposal of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts'.
- **Germany:** the External students' examination under § 45 (2) of the Vocational Training Act (BBiG) and § 37 (2) of the Crafts Code (HwO) is targeted at people with vocational experience and legitimises admission to the final examination in a recognised occupation that normally requires formal training in the dual system. Admission is granted if the applicant credibly demonstrates that he or she has acquired the necessary competences by presenting references or by providing evidence in another way. They need to be able to demonstrate that they have been working in the occupation for a period of time at least equal to one and a half times that of the stipulated training time.
- **Liechtenstein:** Article 46 of the Vocational Training Act determines that the admission to any examination or qualification approach does not depend on attending certain educational programmes.
- **Norway:** the 1980 Law on vocational training permits individuals to pass a crafts or journeymans examination based on practical work experience, rather than education and training in school and/or the apprenticeship which would normally be required. (However the age of those following the alternative route is on average 10 years higher than for the main route, therefore is likely to be adults who do not fall within the definition of an early school leaver).
- **Poland:** See above. In addition, examinations for craftsmen for the certificate of journeyman and master in crafts can be taken by adults wishing to validate their knowledge and skills acquired through work and theoretical training (they must have as a minimum a lower secondary diploma for the journeyman and an upper secondary diploma for the master examination).¹²

The country update for **Germany** explains in more detail how the applicant can document his /her vocational skills. The first step of the validation process is counselling the external applicant followed by the classification and assessment of the presented documents^{xviii}. Verification of the skills and competences can be by practical performance or, more widely used, by documentation^{xix}. Besides 'standard evidence' such as applications and CVs, formal evidence such as job references, attestations of employers, work contracts, trade applications and statutory declarations can be used. Alternative evidence includes references from customers, examples of work, information about former practice by the applicant him/herself, documents about a vocational or academic training that has been cut short, module-examinations in higher education and certificates of attendance or further education certificates^{xx}.

¹² Regulation of the Minister of Education of 14 September 2012 on journeyman exam, master exam and examination carried out by the examination boards of Chambers of Polish Craft Association (Journal of Laws 2012 item 1117).

These external examinations may represent one of the least expensive methods of validation. As mentioned above they are likely to be more appropriate for ESLs with less 'complex' needs and backgrounds, for example young people who may have left school to take up a job, acquired skills in that employment, and wish to have them recognised through a qualification. However for many ESLs written tests may not be the most appropriate method of assessment, because tests can be intimidating for those individuals who have had negative experiences in the formal education sector, have low self-confidence or more generally have poor verbal/writing skills^{xxi}. When written tests are used, holding them at adult education institutes or other places outside formal education establishments seems to lower the barriers for people with negative school experiences (e.g. shown by experiences from Austria)^{xxii}.

Another alternative method of testing is to use computer-based tests. For example, the AWICO (Assessment of Wider Competences)^{xxiii} is a computer-based test to assess key skills within the areas of personal skills, communication, teamwork, problem solving, and conflict resolution. The AWICO project arose out of a multilateral EU project. It was part of the Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation training programme and was implemented under the leadership of **Liechtenstein** between 2009 and 2011.^{xxiv} The test was developed scientifically and tested in practice by a project group from five countries (Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Austria, United Kingdom, and Bulgaria). The test was specially developed for people who either have no recognised education, or have completed basic vocational training but have not done any further training for a long time.^{xxv} The AWICO project tries to improve their situation, based on the assumption that there are people without recognised training qualifications but with very good key skills. The project aims to facilitate recording and proving of these skills to improve the chances of these individuals to gain a foothold in the job market (again). The AWICO test is internet-based, only requiring a computer and a password. The test is not freely accessible online, but can be carried out through authorised institutions and in conjunction with mentoring.^{xxvi} To date about 90 institutions are registered and authorised to carry out the AWICO test with their participants.^{xxvii}

The **CREATE** project, described in more detail below and in the case study produced for the 2014 Inventory, also provides an example of the use of innovative assessment methods to support the recognition of prior work-based learning. ESLs were a particular target group of this project, which developed assessment methods relating to web design and computer animation, since they tend to show more interest in alternative subjects (such as, for example, computer animation, web design, etc.) compared to the more traditional subjects offered at upper secondary general schools. This preference for non-academic or alternative learning opportunities is discussed in more detail in the following section.

3.5 Alternatives to traditional 'academic' qualifications

Some young people drop out of school because they find it hard to engage with the curriculum or teaching methods in use. As such, alternative qualifications (as opposed to the more traditional or 'academic', formal curriculum) present a means of attracting ESLs back into education, or indeed preventing them from dropping out in the first place. These include for example work-based learning, part-time learning opportunities and blended learning, amongst others.

Across the Inventory updates, a number of vocational or professional, competence-based qualifications are described, which include an element of validation of non-formal or informal learning. These include the Competence-based qualifications in Finland, SVQs in Cyprus, vocational qualifications in the Czech Republic, professional qualifications in Estonia and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in Slovenia, as well as trade testing in Malta.

As an example, the **Finnish** competence-based qualifications are described in more detail in the box below. The basic idea behind these qualifications is that adults with previous work (paid or unpaid) and/or study experience should only study those areas of study programmes that provide them with skills that they do not as yet command. CBQs therefore enable adults to shorten their study time by having their prior experience validated.

Competence Based Qualifications, Finland

The Competence Based Qualifications (CBQs) embed validation of non-formal and informal learning as an integral part of the entire qualifications system. The system has been in place since 1994 and was further strengthened in 2007 by the Decree on Individualisation. The CBQ system is very popular among the adult population in Finland and each year 100,000 people access the system.

CBQs are defined by law as 'qualifications independent of the acquisition method of vocational skills or competences'. They are based on a validation, or 'personalisation' process which takes place in three stages:

Application phase: the personalisation in the application phase begins from information and initial guidance. It has to be ensured by the (training) organisation that each candidate receives adequate information on possible options of training programmes, validation procedures and options for learning methods. Together with the organisation's advisors and counsellors the ideal "learning path" or "career path" for the candidate is canvassed. The candidate's skills and prior learning are canvassed and identified, possible needs for additional training and learning are identified along with possible needs for guidance and support during the entire process.

Competence test phase: The planning of competence tests is dependent on the results of the application phase and the requirements of the CBQ in question. If the applicant provides enough evidence of his/her skills in the canvassing process, some or all CBQ modules may be accredited without testing. If, however, the applicant provides no or insufficient evidence, competence tests are planned to take place in a suitable working environment. At this phase an individual competence-based test plan is drafted, in which the candidate, along with the advisor and/or trainer compile a plan according to which the candidate will carry out the required competence tests. The plan states the method, place and time of carrying out the tests. Competence tests are carried out accordingly.

Completing the vocational skills phase: In case the candidate requires preparatory training in order to carry out the CBQs, the (training) organisation is responsible for canvassing and identifying the learning needs of the applicant. The organisation has to be able to provide flexibility in learning options and various study methods and learning environments for the candidate. The organisation has to take into account the candidate's life and work situation, learning needs including on-the-job-learning and prior learning, cultural and linguistic background.

Statistics show that there are significant benefits to the CBQs: *"While three quarters of those who had completed a qualification on curricular programmes in 2008 were included in the labour force in 2009, the proportion for those who had completed an upper secondary vocational qualification as a competence-based qualification was nine out of ten, with 71% employed and 19% unemployed"*^{xxxviii}.

Whilst the Finnish CBQs are considered part of the formal education system, this is not the case for vocational qualifications which can be acquired through validation in the Czech Republic. The **Czech** vocational qualifications that are included in the national qualifications register (Narodni soustava kvalifikaci – NSK) can be achieved through either an assessment of competence without any prior training or through non-formal learning. The NSP contains occupational standards that describe the tasks and expectations for a given profession/position. People who undergo non-formal learning preparing for these qualifications take the same assessment as people who have their competences recognised without any prior training. However, some qualifications in the NSK correspond to parts of formal VET qualifications and can be recognised in view of passing the assessment for the latter. Also, a number of qualifications in the NSK can be recognised as part of the conditions regarding 'professional competence' when a person requests a trade licence (živnost), creating an incentive for people to use the system.

Another example can be found in **Cyprus**, where the System of Vocational Qualifications (SVQ), now in its second phase, allows individuals to obtain a vocational qualification, regardless of the learning pathways through which the relevant knowledge, skills, and competences have been developed. The system is based on Vocational Qualification Standards and aims at promoting the local human resources through the assessment of

knowledge and competences and the certification of vocational qualifications. In the SVQ, an individual may seek the validation of his/her knowledge and professional competences or a company can seek the validation of its employees. Successful candidates are awarded a vocational qualification. If the candidate has succeeded in some of the qualification modules, a certification is provided only for those modules. The vocational qualifications achieved are gradually accepted by the labour market, both the by public and the private sector.

Another alternative competence certificate is offered in **Malta**, where the Trade Testing system was set up in order to assess individuals who have acquired knowledge, skills and competence in a particular occupation but do not possess a formal qualification. There are 57 occupations in which Trade Testing is offered, which span a number of sectors including care, construction, engineering, hospitality and tourism and IT. Candidates who successfully pass the Trade Testing are awarded a Certificate of Competence in that particular occupation.

The credibility and awareness of any alternative qualifications is an important issue for ESLs. If the qualification resulting from the validation process is not recognised by employers or they do not consider the qualification to be of the same value as those acquired through formal learning, then the outcome will have less benefit for the individual in terms of their employability. Quality assurance is therefore also an important factor – there need to be robust quality assurance processes in place to ensure there is trust in the validation methods and outcomes of validation processes and to avoid the risk of creating a ‘two-tier system’. The use of standards to ensure consistency in the validation system is for example one way to ensure credibility of the outcomes. For example, in **Turkey**, certificates awarded through the validation process for vocational qualifications are different from those awarded at the end of formal education and are not recognised in the formal education system, therefore do not provide flexibility to access/progress into higher education. Nevertheless, the certificates obtained through non-formal learning *are* recognised on the labour market, since National Occupational Standards are used for the development of the National Qualifications for each occupation. In the **Netherlands**, one possible outcome of the EVC process is accreditation of the candidate’s learning outcomes, measured against a national qualification standard, in the form of an ‘Ervaringscertificaat’. However, the ‘Ervaringscertificaat’ is not an award itself but an official certificate with the described competences that can be awarded by the exam committee of the chosen standard. Therefore, in the Netherlands there is a kind of ‘firewall’ between accrediting prior learning outcomes and awarding the accredited learning outcomes in terms of exemptions for a qualification or for a full qualification.

However, as indicated previously in this report, some early school leavers have negative perceptions or have had negative experiences of formal education. Thus they may respond better to learning offered in a more informal environment, or through a different mode, such as shorter or modular courses, or alternative methods of teaching / learning. However, these learning opportunities may only be available as non-formal provision and once completed, participants may only acquire certificates to confirm their attendance, certificates which are not formally recognised (e.g. on the national qualifications framework) or no certificates at all. The outcomes of the learning therefore are not recognised by other learning providers / employers. Validation can provide an opportunity to recognise this learning, with many benefits for the individual (increased self-esteem, motivation to take on further learning, evidence to apply for a job, etc).

For example, the **CREATE** (Validation of self-aCquired learning and cREdits trAnsfer in web design and compuTEr animation) project, which is described in detail in the case study produced for the 2014 Inventory update, leads to the award of a certificate to recognise work-based learning in the ICT / Multimedia sector. Learners eligible to take part include young people (aged 16-25), including early school leavers, and the long-term unemployed who have acquired knowledge, skills and competences in web design and computer animation informally and wish to validate it. The project uses some innovative assessment methods including:

- Interactive tests: for example, ‘multiple choice’, ‘true and false’, ‘matching drag and drop’, etc., using different images and videos in some of the questions;
- E-games (simulations); and

- An E-portfolio: the toolkit uses several popular e-Portfolio systems including LinkedIn, Behance Network¹³, Mahara,¹⁴ etc.

Although the resulting certificate alone does not lead to the acquisition of a qualification from the formal system, it describes in a transparent way the competences acquired through informal learning. Therefore, it can be used as supporting evidence in the practical part of the state exams for theory of profession and practice of profession¹⁵. In this instance, the validation process generates evidence to inform an application for a formal qualification.

Alternatively, validation can provide an opportunity to recognise non-formal / informal types of learning in a more formal manner, which can be used as evidence to support further progression. In **Wales** for example, the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) provides a means of recognition of prior non-formal learning through its Quality Assured Lifelong Learning (QALL) pillar. QALL provides a means by which learning *provision* can be recognised, rather than the learning undertaken by an individual. This includes for example adult and community learning, training undertaken in the workplace, informal, specialist, interest- or hobby-based learning.

Another example of the use of smaller units or credits to recognise non-formal or informal learning are the 'certificates of competence' (*kompetansebevis*) in **Norwegian** upper secondary education and training, which are awarded to recognise that an individual has achieved certain objectives (learning outcomes) within an upper secondary curriculum. The certificates can serve as a stand-alone evidence of competences and can be used for example to support a job application or participation in non-formal further education courses. Certificates of competence can be awarded through both formal education and validation of prior learning.

Nevertheless, there is also a risk that ESLs might be put off learning which is 'formalised' through validation, due to their own negative perceptions of formal education. A balance needs to be found between maintaining the benefits of informal and non-formal learning and transforming such education into formal learning.

3.6 Skills audits and portfolio approaches

Nevertheless, it is not always necessary to acquire a qualification to improve an individual's employability, or to help them to progress one step forwards in terms of their education or employment trajectory. Indeed, some ESLs may face such complex issues that the idea of working towards a qualification is simply not an option at first. These young people may just need an opportunity to re-assess their current situation and identify a way forward. One way of doing this is through the use of portfolio or skills audit approaches to validation, i.e. formative methods.

Many formative approaches to validation have been identified across the 2014 Inventory, but again, few of these focus specifically on ESLs. One initiative focused on this target group is the 'My Skills, My Future' (MSMF) resources which have been developed in **Scotland**. These are targeted mainly at young people at risk of leaving school early, or who have already left school with few or no formal qualifications. The resources are intended to help the users to understand their range of skills and to support the decision-making process regarding future career or further training.

¹³ The Behance Network is an online portfolio platform for creative professionals across multiple industries. In 2011 the Behance Network became Webby Award Honouree in the category self-promotional/portfolio and social media, <http://www.behance.net>.

¹⁴ Mahara E-Portfolio is a learner-centred form of 'Personal Learning Environment'. It provides users with tools to create and maintain a digital portfolio of their learning, and social networking features to allow users to interact with each other, <https://mahara.org>.

¹⁵ These exams are carried out in front of an examination committee. The examination committee may take into consideration the CREATE certificate.

My Skills, My Future (MSMF)

The 'My Skills, My Future' resources are primarily targeted at young people who are considered to be at risk of leaving school, or who have already left school, with few or no formal qualifications. They can also be used with young people who have been made redundant from their first job, adult returners to the workplace or the long-term unemployed.

The resources can be used by advisers in a range of settings to help the users to identify the transferable skills they have developed in other settings (e.g. hobbies, part-time jobs etc), to think about those skills through reflective practices, and map those skills using the SCQF as an informal benchmark. The tools use a contextualised version of the SCQF level descriptors, to make it easier for young people to understand them. The resources also help the young people to write competence-based statements for a CV or application for further learning.

The My Skills, My Future resources have already been used with a range of individuals, including young people leaving care settings (see above for a detailed description of this pilot). This initial use of the resources has highlighted some potential benefits, which are:

- The resources help individuals clearly understand their range of skills
- They can help the users in a decision-making process regarding future career or further training
- By helping individuals to understand where their learning sits on the SCQF, their self-confidence and aspirations can be raised which helps build self-confidence and raises aspirations
- Using the resources can be a way of generating evidence towards certain SQA awards

The My Skills My Future resources were developed by the SCQF Partnership, Glasgow Caledonian University's Department for Learning Enhancement and Academic Development (GCU LEAD) and Skills Development Scotland (SDS), working in partnership. The resources were launched in May 2013 and have been disseminated via training workshops for advisers (which have been fully subscribed).

In **Switzerland**, the initiative 'Case management'¹⁶ (integrated with the project Case management Plus) involves the development of a 'bilan' for young people under the age of 24, who are having difficulties to integrate into the labour market after completion of compulsory schooling (they have interrupted their apprenticeship, have failed exams, or are unable to find a job after completion of their apprenticeship). The target in the long term of this initiative, started in 2008, is to increase from 90% to 95% the percentage of young people who complete upper-secondary level training. In particular, professional management training aims to identify young people at risk or in a critical situation, to observe them constantly and to closely support them for a time. The realisation of the concept of case management includes the following seven phases:

1. Identification (bilan)
2. Contact, clarification
3. Assessment of the profile, analysis of the situation
4. Definition of the targets, scheduling of the measures
5. Coordination, cooperation
6. Observation, surveillance
7. Evaluation¹⁷.

Other portfolio or skills audit initiatives focus more broadly on the low-skilled / low-qualified, i.e. without the age limits which define the ESL group. For example in **Iceland**, LLL centres, after the economic crisis, have provided skills audits for the target group of unemployed adults who have not completed upper secondary school level education. The LLL centres also offer courses and guidance for that target group in general in relation to the development of a portfolio of competences/skills audit that can lead to validation or other types of career decisions with the support of career counsellors at the LLL centres. In **Switzerland**, there are many types of skills audit on offer and one of the targets for these is

¹⁶ <http://www.sbf.admin.ch/berufsbildung/01496/index.html?lang=fr>

¹⁷ <http://www.sbf.admin.ch/berufsbildung/01501/01502/index.html?lang=fr>

'persons who lack qualifications but would like, nevertheless, to enrol in an education and training programme'.

An example of a portfolio initiative designed to support workers with few qualifications, is the **INLearning** project which was funded through the Leonardo da Vinci programme. It provides an electronic means of storing evidence of learning, which can be used to support a validation process.

The INLearning Project

The Leonardo project, INLearning which was spearheaded by the Malta Qualifications Council from 2009 to 2011, aimed at promoting social inclusion through the development of a methodology framework for the validation of informal and non-formal learning. This was done through the use of a portfolio pen drive called 'LIFEPASS'.

The need for the project was identified through recognition that a number of workers within the Maltese and European labour market possess no official qualifications from formal institutions, yet have acquired knowledge, skills and competences as a result of informal and non-formal learning, often through work experience. Being competent yet unqualified, these people run the risk of being excluded from the workforce due to lack of formal recognition and also limit themselves from progressing within the European Qualifications Framework, as part of a lifelong learning process.

The 'LIFEPASS' portfolio pen drive can be used across different sectors and is suitable for use across Europe. The tool has been tried and tested in connection with a number of jobs in different sectors that were considered in this project namely: printing, agribusiness, construction, hospitality, transport, security, and childcare. LIFEPASS aims to reduce inequalities and promote social inclusion among those who do not possess any formal qualifications. This framework will also help to achieve coherence across European countries and facilitate recognition of the validation process.

It also helps individuals become aware of the richness of their learning and competences. The LIFEPASS tool allows different formats of evidence (photos, videos, testimonials etc.) to be included in preparing evidence of one's learning during the validation process^{xxix}.

In other countries, portfolios or skills audit approaches are developed specifically for young people. For example in Luxembourg, the Public Employment Service (Agence pour le développement de l'emploi - ADEM) offers a specific type of skills audit to young people (aged 16-29). A three-week programme called Bilan de compétences professionnelles (BCP) has been offered since 2007 to this target group. The measure is delivered in cooperation with the non-profit organisation, InterActions asbl, Schlaifmillen and in 2013, 119 young people participated. In **Slovenia**, there is a tool developed by a private company (a student work provider) called 'My experience' (*Moje izkušnje*) which is a tool for validation and recognition of working experience, gained through student work. Students and secondary school pupils can obtain an electronic or paper certificate about their work experience. The service brings a quality and informative review/overview of all working activities. Young people can access the 'My experience' tool electronically (a digital portfolio) and they can export the certificate to PDF file or print it out, show it to their potential employer and enhance their chances of obtaining a job. This tool has been used by over 130,000 young people.

In **Germany**, the established validation initiative 'ProfilPASS'^{xxx}, which aims to review, document and assess informally acquired competences, regardless of where they were acquired or their field of learning, recognised that young people have specific needs and found the more cognitive access to the tool challenging. A separate route for young people to acquire a ProfilPASS portfolio was therefore set up (known as the 'ProfilPASS für junge Menschen') in 2007. Pilot activities with students have shown that the greatest benefits from the ProfilPASS process for young people are:

- the motivation to reflect on oneself and one's own accomplishments
- a sophisticated and comprehensive picture of one's own strengths
- interaction with other people, especially external third parties, particularly for the young people surveyed, who rarely have the opportunity to talk to anyone with no pre-conceptions of them

- consideration of what you want and need to work on, in a positive, forward-looking sense
- the knowledge that application and effort are rewarded
- increased self-awareness in the sense of “I know more about myself”
- motivation and active approach to the next steps^{xxxix}.

Portfolios can also be used to inform an application for summative validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, whilst a portfolio may be a useful method of identifying and documenting an individual’s experience, skills and competence, it may not be sufficient on its own to inform an assessment of the individual’s learning outcomes. For example in **Norway**, new validation guidelines state that a portfolio alone is not enough as an assessment – written documents should be combined with something such as a dialogue, because written documents may not describe well enough what the person can do with what they know. This is said to be particularly the case for learners wishing to use validation towards an upper secondary level qualification - many are not aware of their own competence or are not able to express them. The guidelines therefore aim to inspire the Norwegian counties to use a combination of methods as well as the portfolio.

Guidance and support therefore have a vital role in supporting ESLs taking part in any validation process, to help them to overcome previous negative experiences, or negative perceptions of formal schooling, as well as to tackle a lack of self-confidence and awareness of any useful skills or competences they may possess. This support can be provided through one-to-one or group support from a practitioner, or advice from a mentor, for example. The guidance offered should also help the young person to gain an understanding of their own achievements, and how to present these, as well as helping them to create a portfolio to document them. One previous study explains why: *“reflection on and understanding of the achievement was more important than the recognition itself. End users (i.e. employers, training providers and colleges) felt that any portfolio or certificate of achievement would have little weight in itself; more important would be the ability of the young person to understand, explain and market the skills described on their certificate.”*^{xxxix}

The presentation of any tools used to support a portfolio / skills audit approach may also have a bearing on its success with the target group of ESLs. For instance, the terminology used should be accessible and avoid the use of too much technical language or jargon, which may put users off. The use of images and colour may also make such tools more appealing, as shown in the example above of the ‘About Me’ cards used in the Scottish RPL toolkit used to support looked-after young people.

It is also necessary to emphasise the importance of highly competent personnel involved in validation, not only to ensure the most appropriate methods are selected at the relevant stages to best suit the individual but also to ensure the diverse needs of the ESL sub-groups are met.

3.7 Learning opportunities tailored to their needs / profile

Some ESLs may wish to ‘top-up’ the learning they interrupted, without having to go through the full course again. They therefore need some kind of assessment to work out what they can already do / already know, then opportunities to take part in tailored learning provision to help them fill in the gaps. Validation can be used in a number of countries as a means of shortening the route to a formal qualification, although these opportunities are not targeted specifically at ESLs (but may be focused on the low-skilled / low-qualified).

For example, it has been emphasised in **Iceland** that individuals should have an open opportunity to complete their studies at an upper secondary school in conjunction with the validation process, if they choose to (the majority does). In many cases, upper secondary schools offer groups of participants from a validation project to study in tailor-made programmes towards completion.

In **Sweden**, validation within adult education and Public Employment Services (PES) is primarily targeted at persons with less education and/or those far from the labour market. The validation process results either in a statement of competence mapping and a possible recommendation; a certificate of competence (partial qualification) and a possible statement for completion; or a competence certification (a full qualification).

In **Switzerland** upper secondary VET can be accessed by people with at least five years of experience via a process of validation which involves five phases, as outlined below. In Phase 4, the additional training or professional practice required by the individual to acquire a full qualification is specified.

Switzerland: Phases of the validation process linked to upper secondary VET

Phase 1: Information and advice

This phase informs adults about the possibilities of having access to validation procedures, as well as about the whole process (objectives, activities, conditions of admission, fees).

Phase 2: Self-evaluation (Bilan)

In this phase, the applicants identify, analyse and substantiate in a dossier their professional and personal skills, their general culture, and work out a validation dossier.

Phase 3: Assessment

Experts assess the dossier. This validation dossier is complemented by an interview (between experts and applicants).

Phase 4: Accrediting

The responsible canton office (the same that recognises formal diplomas) decides, on the basis of the documents of the applicant and of the experts' report, which professional competences and those of a general nature have been attained and writes a certificate for the acquired competences. It also specifies the complementary training or the professional practice which the applicant has still to perform in order to obtain the qualification. Depending on the applicant's situation, the complementary training can consist of other practical professional experiences, of offers of non-formal training or of parts of a formal training. All the training complements must be achieved within five years after the date of issue of the certificate of the acquired competences and must be attested in the validation procedure.

Phase 5: Certification

Certification occurs in the customary fashion and is under the responsibility of the organisations of formal professional training of the Upper-secondary level. When all the required professional skills have been evidenced and accredited, the canton of the applicant issues a Federal Certificate for the related profession. There is no difference between this certificate and a certificate obtained through formal VET.

Another example is the 'You have skills/competences' initiative, a pilot project in **Austria** for the validation of professional competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. The target group of the project is persons with low qualifications and immigrants: semi-skilled workers who want to improve their skills and secure employment through the acquisition of an apprenticeship certificate. The process includes the creation of personal portfolio with a focus on competences relevant for the chosen profession. In a 'performance check', competences identified in the portfolio process are compared to those in the corresponding job profiles and examination regulations, resulting in a 'positive list' with proven competences and an 'open list' of competences that must still be acquired. Candidates are then given advice on further education, leading to the development of an individual training plan to cover the competences in the 'open list'. A second 'performance check' focuses on the competences in the 'open list'. The overall result of the validation process is regarded as equivalent to a regular apprenticeship certificate issued after passing the final apprenticeship examination. The apprenticeship office validates the competences and issues the apprenticeship certificate.

Finally in **Slovakia**, some students in formal education can request to follow an individualised education programme. This exempts them from attending the programme and they can learn at home instead. This is in particular applicable for pupils and students whose

health situation does not enable them to participate in classroom teaching, those who practice a sport or another activity at a level that does not enable them to attend school on daily basis or other exceptional situations.

3.8 Access to Higher Education (HE)

Whilst it is traditional for access to Higher Education (HE) to be dependent on the acquisition of upper secondary qualifications, in many countries there are possibilities for learners without such qualifications to access HE through the validation of their prior learning. The aim of such initiatives is usually to widen participation in HE to under-represented groups (other reasons are identified and discussed in the thematic report on validation in HE, produced for the 2010 European Inventory Update^{xxxiii}). Again the focus is more on adults who have acquired skills and competences through work or other activities, but some ESLs may also be able to access HE through these routes.

There are also some opportunities for learners to gain exemptions in the HE sector through validation, although these seem to be less common^{xxxiv}. HEIs are generally largely autonomous in the implementation of validation processes and often define their own procedures. However, some countries do have a legislative framework or national arrangements in place, which presents an opportunity for some ESLs to access HE (although not specifically targeted at the 18-24 ESL group).

Some examples of opportunities to access HE which are open to ESLs are given below.

- In **Austria**, there are several opportunities to access HE for 'non-traditional' learners. Firstly, under certain conditions, the universities of applied sciences can admit applicants who have not taken the *Reifeprüfung* examination (the upper secondary school leaving exam providing direct access to HE). External candidates can also sit for the *Reifeprüfung* exam (without participating in the relevant formal learning prior to this). In addition, access can be granted to continuing higher education courses for people who do not have the *Reifeprüfung* but have relevant vocational training and long-term practice, based on the regulation of each individual course. The respective institution decides on the evidence that must be provided. Finally, the *Studienberechtigungsprüfung (SBP)*, higher education entrance examination) provides restricted access to post-secondary and tertiary educational institutions. It enables those who have not taken the *Reifeprüfung* exam to study specific subjects or subject areas at these institutions. Adult-learning institutions and universities offer non-compulsory bridge courses for the preparation of the exam.
- In **Belgium-Flanders**, for those who have not obtained a diploma of secondary education but are over 21 years old, education institutions offer a special 'entrance examination' ('toelatingsonderzoek'). If granted, the person can access higher education without a formal secondary education diploma. In addition, through a process of validation (*Erkennen van Verworven Competenties, EVC*), institutions can grant a proof of acquired competences ('bewijs van bekwaamheid') which can then lead to the appropriate exemptions/shortened study duration and credit certificates and/or a proof of qualification. This EVC process is defined by the Decree on making higher education more flexible (30 April 2004) but is decentralised with each association¹⁸ in higher education elaborating their own rules of procedure.
- In **Liechtenstein**, a new Regulation on HE regulates admission to programmes without a Matura (upper secondary qualification) – the so-called admission '*sur dossier*' – and obliges HE institutions to decide on the prospective student's ability to study based on adequate approaches to validating non-formal or informal learning.
- In **Switzerland**, for some bachelors, it is possible to be admitted to the first cycle of studies on the basis of former training valued as equivalent to a baccalaureate (upper secondary qualification). Moreover, for each type of university, there are legal bases or programmatic indications which legitimise or enable the activation of validation practices. This framework allows both the possibility to be admitted for those who do not have a baccalaureate and the possibility to validate, partially or completely, a university degree.

¹⁸ An **association** is an official entity regulating the cooperation of a **university** and one or more **university colleges**.

In a few countries, as mentioned in the 2010 thematic report, it is worth noting that validation in HE pre-dates European developments in the field, and has been used for a long time to entitle individuals to access HE with a view to enlarge access for new audiences. For example, in France, a new practice emerged in the 1970s to recognise the learning outcomes of workers (obtained through work experience or short in-company training courses) as an entry to HE.

Another potential benefit to ESLs of the use of validation within HE is that it can help to promote greater flexibility or permeability across the whole education system. For adult learners who have taken part in second chance education opportunities for example, validation might enable their learning to be recognised as an equivalent to more traditional entry requirements.

4 Conclusions

Early school leaving is a complex issue which has been recognised as a policy priority in Europe. Validation of non-formal and informal learning has also gained in profile in recent years, both at policy-level and also in terms of implementation and take-up. It forms part of a range of education and social policy instruments that individually or in combination with other policy measures can be used to support a range of different user groups. It would seem however that validation has traditionally been seen as a useful opportunity for adults, or for young people who are engaged in education, training or employment, to recognise the skills they have acquired through extra-curricular activities. But validation also has the potential to bring wide benefits to young people who have dropped out of school, including to help them to acquire a 'second-chance' qualification, to find a pathway to employment, a route back into education, or simply an understanding of their own competences and capabilities.

The 2014 Inventory country updates do not identify a significant number of validation projects targeted specifically at ESLs. Nevertheless, ESLs may be eligible for or fall within the priority target groups for other validation initiatives, but are not their sole target group. The 2014 Inventory does however serve to highlight how different validation practices can be of particular use and relevance to the different sub-groups and age ranges of the ESL group. These include second chance' opportunities to acquire formal qualifications, which can incorporate validation at the point of access or for the award of (partial) qualifications, credits or modules. It also includes a range of different validation techniques or approaches such as:

- 'External' examinations, which allow direct entry to the final examination for the qualification concerned, without having to take part in a formal training opportunity.
- Alternative qualifications, which include an aspect of validation (e.g. vocational / professional qualifications which recognise on-the-job learning).
- Validation of alternative (non-formal) learning opportunities (e.g. which take place in a more informal environment, or through a different mode).
- Formative approaches, including portfolios / skills audits, which can help ESLs to begin to understand their own competences and to increase their self-confidence. Tailored learning opportunities, which are designed on the basis of the outcomes of a validation process.

These different types of validation suit various sub-groups of the diverse ESL group. For instance, for young people who left school early to take up an opportunity in the labour market, external examinations may present a quick and cost-effective means to acquire a formal qualification for the skills they have acquired through work. For young people with more complex needs and perhaps negative perceptions of the formal education environment, formative approaches may present a more approachable method of formulating a pathway back into education, training or work.

Across the different opportunities, there are various important considerations to bear in mind. These include for example ensuring the outcome of a summative validation process is credible and recognised by employers and/ or education / training providers. For formative approaches, the outcome should be a lasting impact on the young person's self-awareness and confidence, as well as a record of their current skills and competences. It is also important to ensure that any effort to 'validate' learning acquired by ESLs does not put the

target group off taking part, because of their previous negative experiences/ perceptions of formal education.

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