



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

Thematic report: validation methods

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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.

The effective use of validation methods² plays a key role in supporting the success of validation processes, and is therefore an aspect of critical importance. The focus of this thematic report is on the technical, rather than political and legitimacy, aspects of methodologies, although some reflections on those other aspects are included.

The 2010 edition of the Inventory looked at different methods for the *identification* and the *documentation* of competences, and their general advantages and disadvantages. The present analysis places greater emphasis on the differentiation between traditional and alternative forms of assessment -and through it, the relationship between methodologies in the recognition of formal and non-formal/ informal learning-, the use of multiple methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and their combination, and the use of different methods at different points of the validation 'cycle'.

There are several reasons why the methodologies employed for the validation non-formal and informal learning should be of interest. First, the formal education system does not exhaust the knowledge, skills and competences that individuals possess or employers value, which brings the attention to how validation of learning acquired formal education operates in methodological terms, to ensure its technical quality in terms of authenticity, validity or reliability.

Second, validation can be used to obtain access to a course, credits that form part of a course or even obtain a full qualification in some contexts, but it can also help to guide the process of formal education: validation non-formal and informal learning may be a tool in a move towards personalised learning of the kind that is now enabled by the use of new technologies. Students go to formal education with other learning than that occurs and recorded in the formal education system. Validating that learning can help to design and materialise individual educational pathways.

Third, if the recognition of formal and non-formal/ informal learning share methods of assessment, there is potential for mutual learning in this area between these different sectors. In relation to some methodologies, developments may be more advanced in the formal sector, but in others it will be outside it.

The thematic report is structured as follows: first, the report discusses validation methods and methods for assessment in formal education. The second and third sections focus on the use of multiple methods and the use of validation methods at different stages of the validation process respectively.

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 In this report methods and methodologies are used interchangeably.

1.1 Validation methods and methods for assessment in formal education

Much has been debated in recent times about the difference between knowledge, skills and competences acquired in formal education and those acquired outside formal education. In relation to assessment methodologies, by contrast, there seems to be a lesser degree of disagreement. The fundamental instruments that are available to assess knowledge, skills and competences (acquired within our outside formal education) are to a large extent shared. This is so, even though the situations within which they will play can be significantly different (de Graaff 2014).

The 2010 version of the European Inventory (Souto-Otero 2010) outlined a series of methods for the extraction of evidence for validation purposes (tests and examinations; conversational methods; declarative methods; observations; simulations; evidence extracted from work or other practices), and methods to document evidence ('live evidence'; CVs and individual statements of competences; third party reports; portfolios). It was acknowledged that this division is not straightforward. Some authors will sub-divide some of the methods to extract or document evidence. Race (2001) reviews the pros and cons of 15 "different assessment techniques" and differentiates between "unseen and time-constrained written exams", "open book exams", "open notes exams" and "structured exams", etc. which we compressed into tests and examinations. While recognising the differences between subtypes of the methodologies presented, the discrete set of categories presented in 2010 strikes a balance between parsimony and comprehensiveness, and is considered sufficient for our purposes. It was also acknowledged at the time that some methods, like portfolios, are multifaceted and have elements of extraction as well as documentation as they identify, collect, select and reflect upon material -see Hamps-Lyons 2003 and McMillan 2004 for a more detailed discussion and contrasting views on the character of portfolios as tools for the collection of work or instruments for assessment. In the 2010 version of the Inventory the advantages and disadvantages of these different methods for validating learning were outlined.

The most traditional forms of assessment in formal education are tests and examinations, but the choice of range of instruments for and ways of assessment is increasing in that sector too. In fact the 'gold' standard in assessment is becoming the triangulation of methods. This is perhaps why in a subject like medicine, the variety in assessment methodologies that can be observed is so rich (Schumway and Harden 2003). As Breslow et al. (2007:2) note: 'If several different sources of data are used, it increases the probability that the findings present an accurate picture. In other words, the strongest assessment programs will rely on a mix of direct and indirect measures.'

The second thing to note is that the palate of methods for validation is not radically different from that which can be used in formal education institutions. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) outlines a series of methods to measure learning outcomes to clarify: 'what knowledge and abilities have students acquired from both their academic work and their co-curricular activities during their years in college' (Breslow et al. 2007:2). This framing of the question underlines that students will be interested in the knowledge, skills and competences that they acquire in formal education and non-formal/ informal education. Moreover, the discussion Breslow et al. provides suggests that assessment methods can be shared between formal and non-formal/ informal learning. The range of methods outlined is, on the whole, similar to those named in the 2010 Inventory: standardised tests; written/ verbal products such as exams, essays, presentations (examinations); analysis of assignments designed to test conceptual understanding (examinations/ assignments); think aloud protocols³ (a conversational or declarative method); observations of students performing a task, surveys of students and exit interviews (declarative methods and individual statements of competences); grades (a form of third party report); a portfolio compiled over the course of undergraduate study.

Both elements open up avenues for cross-fertilisation in the area of methodology between the formal, the non-formal and the informal. Assessment has indeed been for long one of the main difficulty areas to move towards a lifelong-learning approach where distinctions

³ Think aloud protocols ask students to communicate their thinking during the process of problem solving. There are a number of methodologies that are widely accepted to analyse data from think aloud protocols.

between learning settings are eased. As Benett (1993) argued some twenty years ago, the formal education sector has been traditionally very reluctant to move towards formal assessment of work-based learning due, amongst other factors, to conceived difficulties of achieving valid, reliable and comparable assessments as a result of the complex interactions that take place in the workplace. However, Benett himself thought that these were not insurmountable. There have also been strong calls for the assessment of a wide range of professional competences in formal education (Epstein and Hundert 2002).

It should be noted, before we move on to the review of methods offered below, that the above discussion is not meant to imply that there are no significant differences between methodologies in formal education and validation of non-formal and informal learning. For instance, the latter is wider than assessment, comprising the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of knowledge, skills and competences. In relation to assessment specifically, in formal education this is seen as a key tool to drive learning (William 2011), but this is not so much the case in the validation of non-formal and informal learning, where assessment can often come as an unintended result of the learning experience. The threats to the validity of the assessment faced in the context of formal and non-formal and informal learning will also be different. Some biases may be lower for validation given their lack of information on candidates/ greater anonymity (cf. Sadler 2009); whereas other biases may be pressing in the assessment of non-formal and informal learning (Stenlund 2013). However, given their commonalities in the use of types of methods, the lack of dialogue between the formal and the non-formal/ informal in the area of assessment and the importance of this area, an exploration into the relationships between assessment in the formal and the non-formal/ informal, even if only initial and preliminary in many respects, is warranted.

1.1.1 Examinations

Examinations are the traditional way to assess knowledge. McMillan (2004) summarised the main characteristics of 'traditional classroom assessments':

- the emphasis is only on the outcome of the assessment,
- it tests isolated skills or facts,
- it has secret standards and criteria,
- little feedback is provided to learners; and
- it tests individuals after instruction.

Traditional assessment defined in these terms is, according to Bahous (2008:382) still "considered to be the method mostly used as teachers are cautious about trying 'new instruments'". Yet, Williams (2008) notes that the continuous reliance on closed-book handwritten examinations has been identified as a particularly anomalous continuing assessment practice. In fact, students from many different contexts in formal education experience very little assessment variety. Bevitt (2014) reports the cases of students from Cyprus, Poland or the Czech Republic, amongst others.

Traditional assessment is also often employed for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Austrian Inventory report notes that many of the procedures and initiatives for validating non-formally or informally acquired knowledge in that country belong to the formal education system and/or aim at a formal education and training qualification (external examinations). Therefore, the assessment methods used in this context are usually the same as those used in the formal system: the most commonly used methods in the context of external examinations are written tests and oral exams. Sometimes this has been coupled with increased use of technology, without modifying the fundamental principles of the assessment. The postgraduate university course on educational and vocational guidance, (Bildungs- und Berufsberatung) offered at the Danube University Krems uses an online-test (for assessing competences related to the professional field) and an assessment centre (assessing counselling and guidance competences as well as social and self-competences). The Austrian report notes that the fact that many methods of recognition relate to the formal system brings the advantage that the certificates reach a high level of acceptance in the labour market.

The Bulgarian report specifies that, in relation to VET, the assessment methods for validation are the same as those applied in the formal education system: if a candidate wants to

validate a full vocational qualification, he / she has to pass the state examination in Theory of Profession and Practice of Profession. In Croatia, a validation system has not been developed yet at the national level, but in the validation organised by the Croatian Chamber of Trade and Crafts for the purpose of running associated crafts businesses for which adequate qualifications are required competences are tested by the written and practical exam in accordance with the programme prescribed by the ministry responsible for crafts. These are examples of the profuse use of tests and examinations -for certification in all cases- also in relation to validation.

1.1.2 “Alternative” methods

Examination results tend to be provided in the form of a mark or grade. There is little feedback associated with them, and thus they tend to be associated with assessment of – rather than for- learning (Bevitt 2014; McMillan 2004). Struyen et al. (2005) recently talked about a trend towards the ‘expanding repertoire’ for assessment in higher education, based on the use of ‘innovative’ methods of assessment that they associate with portfolios, self and peer assessment and simulations -amongst other methods- as opposed to traditional multiple choice tests and essay writing.

As Bevitt (2014) and Bahous (2008) note that a number of forces have steered developments in formal education in this direction. One of the strongest influences towards the use of alternative methods of assessment is the drive towards assessment *for* learning (Sambell et al. 2013), moving students away from surface approaches to the assessment (assessment *of* learning) and towards deeper levels of engagement with the subject and processing (Rust 2002). A second major push has been given by the need to assess the kinds of learning that are demanded from graduates (and non-graduates) to succeed in the labour market, such as transferable skills or the skills necessary to be a ‘reflective lifelong-learner’. Other factors can be related to the development of new technologies that facilitate greater diversity in assessment, and the need in some education systems (e.g. the UK) to give greater ‘voice’ to students in assessment matters – for instance by having a greater say on the type of assessment that will be selected, and also through greater use of self-assessment and peer-assessment, which are seen to be facilitated by the use of alternative assessment methods.

This is important, as some of the ‘alternative methods’ for assessment are those that have for a long time being central to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. One example of this is the portfolio system (see, for instance, the French report of the Inventory and section 1.3 of this thematic report). Bahous (2008) defined portfolios as an ‘alternative way of assessment’ and concluded that using only portfolios for assessment is difficult, but even so it is more effective than traditional assessment. Portfolios are meant to enable more active participation from students, stimulate reflection, peer and self-assessment and students’ involvement in deciding criteria for evaluation, even though they are also time consuming to prepare and assess (Lynch and Shaw 2005; Souto-Otero 2010). They have, for long, been used for validation, in particular in the adult education sector. While in Austria examinations are the most frequent method to validate non-formal and informal learning, as the Austrian Inventory report notes that in many cases the portfolio method is used in the initiatives developed at adult learning institutes. In this context, supported self-assessment is usually used, with a strong focus on developing the ability of self-reflection. The Bulgarian chapter of the Inventory makes reference to the use of e-Portfolios and e-games. Sectoral differences are important: in Cyprus online tests are overwhelmingly used for the certification of ICT competences, but not in other sectors. However, it should be noted that the use of portfolios can also face challenges, even in the areas where they are meant to be stronger. Baum et al. (2004) found significant differences in the grading of portfolios, Joosten-ten Brinke et al. (2010) on assessors’ views of the fairness of validation of prior learning portfolio assessments and Klenowski and Askew (2006) signaled a number of weaknesses in the ways portfolios are used formatively to guide students’ development. Pokorny (2013) explores how different social practices and approaches from tutors condition the use of portfolios in validation processes and its outcomes in terms of empowering (through a dialogic approach) or disempowering candidates.

1.2 Using multiple methods

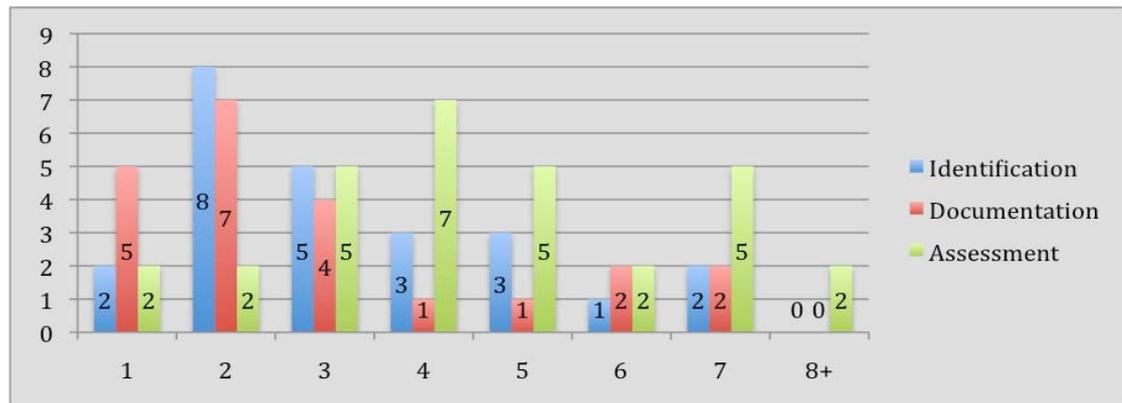
The choice of method of validation is a critical decision. Dochy et al. (1999:147) argued that 'it appears that the type of assessment used by researchers determines what we know of an individual's prior knowledge'. Similar statements could be made in relation to identification or assessment. The availability of multiple methods for assessment is viewed positively in particular by those who defend that education systems should make greater efforts to adapt to different learner styles. Under this view, the availability of different methods can help to 'pick and choose' a methodology that adapts to each learners' needs and context. Examples of assessment methods, provided in the UK's NIACE QALL toolkit described in the UK (England) Inventory report, include case study; learning journal; observation; photographs; written question and answer/test/exam; oral question and answer; written assignment; role play/simulation; and group discussion. The toolkit suggests that the assessment method chosen by the tutor will be the one(s) that fits best with the learners and delivery of the unit. This means that the same unit could be assessed differently depending on the learning context and the learner. However, the toolkit stresses, the regulatory requirements demand that the assessment ensures a robust judgment can be made of whether the learners have met the assessment criteria.

This last point is a crucial counter-balance a view of unrestricted student freedom to choose an evaluation method. Van Der Vleuten and Schuwirth (2005:310) noted that the degree to which the various quality criteria of are met by an assessment method is not "an inherent, immutable characteristic of a particular instrument. For example, a short, multiple-choice question examination will be unreliable for the assessment of a broad domain and an objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) will not be valid when it assesses trivial clinical activities in a postgraduate context. There is no such thing as the reliability, the validity, or any other absolute, immanent characteristic of any assessment instrument." What is being assessed matters, as also does the specific way in which the assessment is set up. They provide data to suggest that differences in the reliability of different methods of assessment strongly depends on the time employed in the testing. The methods that they examine in relation to the medical field (multiple-choice tests, write-in key feature cases, oral examinations, long case examinations, OSCE, practice video assessment, mini-clinical exercises and incognito standardized patients) show very marked differences in reliability after one hour of assessment, but these decrease substantially after eight hours of assessment (Van Der Vleuten and Schuwirth 2005:311). So it is not only the method, but how it is used, that matters. In practice, some countries provide greater possibilities to take the profile of the candidate into account when designing assessment procedures (for instance Norway) than others.

Having said this, this section considers next whether multiple methods, rather than a single method, are accepted for validation by stakeholders. The discussion disaggregates information at the level of the stage of validation (identification, documentation and assessment). This discussion is complemented by that presented in the following subsection of this thematic report, which focuses on the use of particular methods for validation at different stages of the validation process.

Figure 1.1 shows that there is more information on the use of methods for validation at the time of assessment than at any other time in the validation process -identification or documentation. Thirteen Inventory country reports provided a '0' response on the issue of stakeholder acceptance of different methods for validation regarding identification or documentation, implying that there no information on this topic or that no methods were widely accepted, whereas only five provided this reply regarding assessment. This is logical, as assessment is the most visible and better-documented part of validation. A second aspect to take into account is that in most countries more than one method is widely accepted for validation, but in very few countries there is widespread acceptance of more than 3 methods for the identification or documentation of non-formal and informal learning. This contrasts with the situation for assessment, where a wider range of methods is widely accepted in a larger set of countries.

Figure 1.1 Number of most accepted methods in the stages of validation



Source: ICF

This difference may be due to the links between assessment of non-formal and informal learning and the award of qualifications and part-qualifications. Stakeholders may doubt of most methods for the identification and documentation of non-formal learning, but may be more willing to accept the same methods in the area of assessment in particular if this is conducted by educational institutions or professional bodies with which they are familiar and they trust. Thus, the links with formal learning and qualifications can affect the acceptance of the methods used for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Diversity in methods can be the result of central planning (for instance to offer greater choice to learners, as already discussed) but also can derive from a lack of a single national validation process. The Swedish Inventory report notes that there are different validation processes in place in Sweden and that as a reflection of this the actual methodology will depend on whether validation is part of formal education or part of the private sector, adult education or higher education, and/or performed by accredited actors or non-accredited etc. Thus a variety of methods are in use covering the full scale from self-assessment to formal tests and examinations.

The first scenario for the use of multiple methods in a country is 'parallel' use of methods, whereby different methods are used in different sectors. In Finland the Inventory report documented that in VET the competences tend to be demonstrated in a real work environment (e.g. at one's own job or on-the-job-learning). In HEIs simulated competence tests are used to some extent for validation. Examinations are –like in France- hardly used.

In a limited number of cases different methods are 'sequentially available for use', in what we could call 'vertical' multiple of use of methods, (rather than being all available at the same time, to choose one). In Germany, for the admission to the External students' examination for vocational qualifications, besides 'standard evidence' such as applications and CVs, formal evidence such as qualified job references, attestations of employers, working 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. The presentation of this evidence, if successful, will lead to an examination to validation non-formal and informal learning. In other cases, sequential use depends on the existence or not of sufficiently convincing evidence of learning at an early stage of the validation process. This is the case of Competence Based Qualifications (CBQ) in Finland.

Box 1.1 Testing and competence based qualifications in Finland

In the case of CBQ in Finland, the applicant is interviewed in the initial phase (identification) and the qualification options or possibly qualification requirements are discussed depending on the needs of the candidate. Self-assessments are commonly used. An e-tool (www.osaan.fi) (FI), has been developed which comprises of all CBQs and the assessment criteria. The candidate may make a self-assessment to verify if s/he has the required competences to take the competence tests. The candidate is also asked to provide any evidence of his/her competences related to the learning outcomes of the qualification in question.

In cases where the candidate has reliable documented evidence of competences the documentation is delivered to the Qualification Committee for assessment. The Committee may recognize a qualification unit or units to the entire qualification on the basis of the evidence. In cases where there is no documented evidence or one cannot verify competences on the basis of the documentation, competence tests will take place.

The competence tests are in most cases carried out in an authentic work environment. The candidate has drafted an individual plan on how to make his/her competence test and how it complies with the qualification criteria. The test situation is monitored and assessed by an employer representative, an employee representative and a representative from education (tripartite assessment). The assessors record the results on an assessment sheet, in which the learning outcomes and assessment criteria are described. After the competence test the assessors and the candidate review the test situation and give feedback to the candidate. All assessors must reach a consensus of the assessment results. The documented assessment results are delivered to the Qualification Committee, which will award the qualification and the certificate.

In other cases, learners or assessors can choose to take one validation method or another (horizontal use of multiple methods). In the UK, the Agored Cymru RPL policy states that learners wishing to achieve a unit via RPL can choose from two options. The first is to undertake the same assessments as those followed in the formal course of learning, although they do not have to attend taught sessions. If the learner does not attend taught sessions, an authenticity statement, "signed and dated by the learner and signed by a witness (usually the tutor) must be obtained or the tutor may observe the learner undertaking the assessment". The second option is to submit a portfolio of evidence based on previous learning, skills and/or competence, which must be cross-referenced to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the relevant unit(s), together with an authenticity statement, signed and dated by the learner and signed by a witness (usually the tutor).

A particular case in the use of multiple methods is the combination of methods (or 'spiral' use of multiple methods). It has been mentioned above in this thematic report that combining methods is a way to increase the quality of assessment. This is an increasing trend for validation in a number of European countries and has become commonplace in a number of systems over the last decade. The enhancement of the reliability and robustness of the assessment was mentioned in the Danish Inventory report as a justification for the increased use of a combination of methods in that country. A combination of methods is frequent in the VAE system in France, where the portfolio method is often combined with interviews and debates. Other methods can be used as part of the assessment/certification phase (related to the type of learning outcomes to be assessed) such as observation of real or simulated working activities. Tests and examinations, on the other hand, are not common practice as part of the VAE, emphasising its focus on alternative assessment.

Similarly, in Switzerland, the main method used to identify, document and assess learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning is the validation dossier. The evaluation dossier is a collection of descriptions and documents of what the candidate has

learned in non-formal and informal contexts. Often in addition to this, an interview with the assessor is carried out. In some cases, other forms of assessment are used. Interviews are also used by counsellors to help candidates identify implicit skills acquired in non-formal and informal situations, of which candidates are often unaware.

In Norway, although portfolios are commonly used for validation purposes, new guidelines state that they should be combined with other assessment methods as written documents cannot provide a sufficiently good indication of what a person can do. In Austria, the 'You have skills/competences' initiative also uses portfolios. These portfolios are created with a focus on competences relevant for the chosen profession and will be compared to those in the job profiles and examination regulations of the corresponding apprenticeship qualification. However, in many cases the portfolio method alone seems not to be sufficient for establishing trust in one's competences, in particular in relation to professional competences. Thus, the 'You have skills/competences' initiative, for example, also uses 'performance checks' (practical assessments including profession-specific tasks). The same report mentions that it will not always be possible to identify non-formally and informally acquired competences merely through 'dialogue', since practice-oriented competences will have to be demonstrated in different ways.

In Belgium Flanders, and regarding validation in HE, even though working with a portfolio is the most common method used, the Inventory report notes that it often proves to be difficult to assess all individual competences with this tool alone. Some of the associations of higher education institutions in that region have thus developed practice assessments and other broader assessment tools to complement the use of portfolios. A guiding principle in the procedures within the KU Leuven Association is that a judgement on the competences of the candidate is only made if competences can be assessed in three different ways. These are, for the BA in education (primary education) a portfolio, observation in simulated environments and observation in real life situations.

Box 1.2 Combination of assessment methods: procedure in the Bachelor of Education (primary education) KU Leuven

A portfolio ('portfoliobeoordeling').

This is an important step, but it is not compulsory. It consists of a detailed CV that must establish a link between the experience acquired by the applicant at work and the key competences identified by the standard. In fact it constitutes, prior to the assessment process, a means for applicants to anticipate their chances to be successful in the final assessment and to decide if they should continue or not.

Observation in situation either reconstituted or simulated ('praktijkproef').

Applicants must demonstrate that they are able to perform all the tasks described in the standard. There is no partial recognition. If applicants cannot demonstrate all the competences stipulated by the standard, they are encouraged to reinforce them or to widen their professional experience. They can apply maximum twice in a year, so when they have acquired the required competences (at work or in training sessions) they can come back to the assessment centre.

Observation in real situations.

This is only the case for the profession of nursery nurse. The evaluation is conducted by two assessors. They both fill out a grid separately and compare results at the end. The test takes generally about one day (4-8 hours).

In general, there seems to be greater scope for experimentation in the validation of non-formal and informal learning at higher education levels. The CY Inventory chapter, for instance, suggests that exams are often the only method to validate learning at lower levels of education, whereas greater diversity of tools (such as observation, declarative and conversational methods) are used in combination with exams for higher levels.

Communication between assessors and candidates is an important factor to take into consideration when discussing assessment, and in particular when multiple methods are used. The formal education assessment literature has recently stressed the need for students' clarity regarding assessment, in order to perform well in it. This is an area for further improvement in relation to validation, an area where such guidance can be more important than in the formal education system, in particular for those who have only recently entered a professional field. Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) report that student peer assessment in the area of professional practice corresponds less well with faculty assessments than the marking of academic products and processes. This, they argue "may be explained by greater student familiarity with academic products and academic processes they have experienced for much of their formal education, than with professional practice which requires them to learn a new set of skills" (Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000:316). Beyond this, there is a need to be clearer regarding validation processes, which can be complex and vary significantly across institutions.

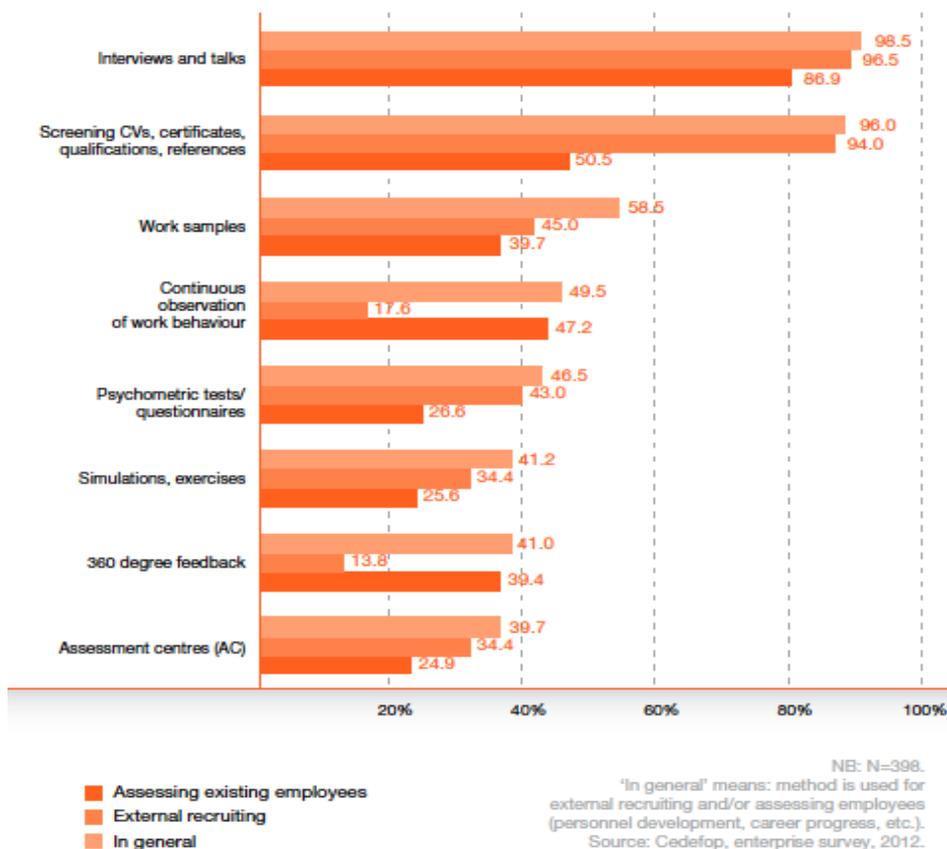
The Inventory has documented that there is indeed insufficient clarity regarding validation procedures linked to formal education. This is echoed in the academic literature. Sandberg's (2011) study of the accreditation of prior experiential learning to qualify for course credits in an adult education programme for health care assistants at the upper-secondary level in Sweden suggests that the candidates did not understand well the assessment process or how their prior learning was linked to credits. This process of clarification may be compounded by staff's own lack of clarity about validation (Dismore et al. 2011), which links with discussions regarding workforce development and requirements for validation.

In Belgium Flanders experienced staff guide HE validation applicants during the preparation of their application. In some HE associations, there are clearly and nominally identified information documents. Support is also commonly offered in other countries, such as France or Switzerland, but tends to be more established when the applicant is required to build a dossier or portfolio, than when (s)he is required to take an examination. This will be problematic if the candidate is unaware of the marking criteria or the standards that may be used in the judgement of exams or written assignments.

1.2.2 Methods used in companies

Much of the above discussions refer to national initiatives for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Traditionally, there has been a lack of information regarding the use of validation methods in private companies. A recent study completed by CEDEFOP (2014) provides additional information regarding the methods more frequently used in companies, which is brought here to complement the information generated in the Inventory. Even though the methods do not exactly match those categories employed in the Inventory, there is a reasonable match. The data reported in that study does not allow us to discuss the extent to which companies combine method, but provides a snapshot of their use of different methodologies. Given the responses regarding the most used methods, a combination of methods can be said to be in place (although we cannot say of what type: parallel, horizontal, vertical or spiral). As shown in Figure 1.2, the CEDEFOP survey suggests, based on a sample of 398 companies, that interviews and talks are the method more frequently used in general, followed by CVs and third party evidences (such as certificates, qualifications or references). Other methods are much less frequently used, in particular assessment centres, 360 degree feedback or simulations.

Figure 1.2 Methods and instruments used in companies for assessing competences, skills or knowledge of employees (percentage of companies surveyed)



Source: CEDEFOP 2014.

On the whole, Figure 1.2 shows that the use of 'classic' methods for validation in the private sector, as illustrated in this and previous editions of the Inventory (certificates, qualifications, references and one's CV to attest competences and interviews and talks to demonstrate those and possibly present a credible narrative that links acquired skills with an specific job opening or career progression path) is overwhelming. Virtually all companies use these two types of validation methods in general.

Within this overall picture, it is interesting to observe that the report notes significant sectoral differences –for instance, interviews and talks are much less used in the construction sector than on average; observations are more frequently used in the finance and insurance and manufacturing sector than in other sections. Moreover, there are differences in the use of different methods depending on the type of knowledge, skill or competence that is being assessed. Thus, whereas interviews and talks are used to assess almost all kinds of skills, the screening of CVs, certificates, qualifications and references are used mainly to appraise profession-related skills. This again echoes findings from the Inventory and the literature (Cooper and Harris 2013). The Bulgarian suggests that the selection of assessment methods depends also on the characteristics of the occupational field. The Inventory report for Malta notes that interviews and debates tend to be used for the assessment of knowledge and communication and social skills; through declarative methods candidates demonstrate critical reflection, while making evidence-based statements about the competences they possess; in tests and examinations candidates demonstrate, orally or in writing, their competences on a specific subject.

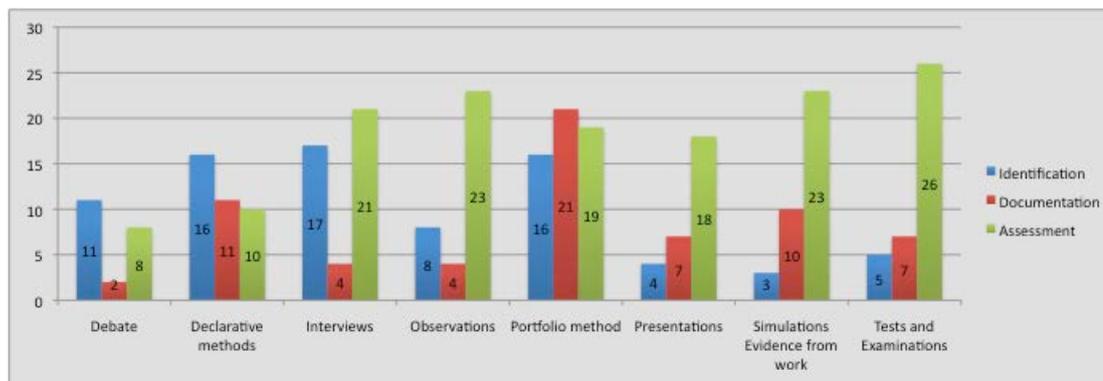
1.3 The use of validation methods at different stages of the validation process

1.3.1 Validation methods and different stages of the validation process

This section takes stock of the methodologies that are most commonly used at three different stages of the validation process (identification, documentation and assessment) in

European countries. Figure 1.3 shows that the portfolio is the most frequently accepted methodology for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (56 mentions in total, adding the three stages of validation considered), followed by interviews, tests and examinations. Debates (21 mentions) and presentations (29 mentions) are the methodologies accepted least often.

Figure 1.3 Most accepted methods in different stages of the validation process



Source: ICFI

Second, importantly, the figure suggests that there is a degree of specialisation on the 'acceptance' of different methods in relation to different stages of the validation process. Some methods are accepted fairly evenly across validation stages -the portfolio method, declarative methods- whereas others are not. Tests and examinations and observations are mainly accepted for assessment, interviews are widely accepted for identification and assessment, but not for documentation.

If we focus on the stage of validation, rather than on how a method performs across different stages, to look at the 'degree of specialisation' of validation methodologies we observe that interviews, portfolios and declarative methods are the most frequently accepted methodologies for the identification of non-formal and informal learning. Portfolios are by far the most frequently accepted methodology for the documentation of non-formal and informal learning, followed by declarative methods, and simulations/ evidence extracted from work. However, when it comes down to linking with assessment -and thus also probably link more strongly with certification or qualification-, tests and examinations become the most accepted methodology for validation. Even though the difference with some other methodologies - simulations and evidence extracted from work; observations and interviews in particular- is not large, this may be a disadvantage for those individuals who have had negative experiences of formal education and aim to obtain a certification or qualification through validation. While more research is required on the ways in which previous assessment experiences may influence assessment preferences (Bevitt 2014) it would be reasonable to think that those who have had previous negative educational experiences are likely to be unfavoured by this tendency to rely on classical examinations. In relation to the modes of assessment not typically used in schools (exams and essay writing), Struyven et al. (2005) found that students with good learning skills and students with low test anxiety rates favour the essay type exams, while students with poor learning skills and low test anxiety are less favourable towards this assignment mode.

Box 1.3 Looking at specialisation by method: methods used during the identification, documentation and assessment of non-formal and informal learning in Iceland

In Iceland *identification* is executed through a screening interview with a career counsellor. Portfolio work and self-assessment may be initiated at this stage. The portfolio method is used during *documentation* with guidance of a career counsellor. At the same time a self-assessment against the relevant standards is carried out, with support from the assessor(s) and career counsellor. During the *assessment* phase, methods fit for purpose are selected. The method mostly used is interview, where the assessor(s) and participant have a conversation (including declarative methods/debate) about competences brought forth in the portfolio and in the self-assessment form. During the assessment interview, participants are asked to describe how they would solve a specific problem (case examples) and even perform tasks with tools (simulation and evidence extracted from work). If the assessors have not come to a conclusion after the interview, another meeting is scheduled where more focus is put on simulation and evidence extracted from work and observation (assessors observe).

Even though there are differences in the use of methods by stage of the validation process, national differences and traditions also count, as could already be inferred from the previous discussions presented in this thematic report. There seems to be a difference, for instance, between those countries where examinations are the main way to validate non-formal learning, and those (like Denmark) where dialogue-based and declarative methods are widespread.

1.4 Summary and conclusions

This thematic report has reviewed the use of validation methods in Europe, based on the information contained in the 2014 European Inventory and extant literature on validation and assessment in formal education. It has reviewed the current state of play regarding the relationship between validation methods and methods for assessment in formal education, the use of multiple methods for validation and the use of validation methods at different stages of the validation process. The thematic report has argued that there is much scope to enhance the dialogue between experiences on the validation of non-formal and informal learning and assessment in formal education. While there are many methodological challenges that are specific to each of these sectors, the methods for the identification, documentation and assessment of competences are essentially the same. In some cases, the assessment of formal learning may be more advanced or have greater experience, in others it will be exactly the opposite; hence the potential for mutual learning.

The report has provided a first examination of the extent to which multiple methods are used for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and has found that in contrast to the traditional prevalence of assessment of learning through examinations and tests, multiple methods are accepted for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in most countries. Moreover, the results show that it is in relation to assessment that a wider range of methods is widely accepted in a larger set of countries. A particular case in the use of multiple methods is the combination of methods, which is a tool to increase the quality of assessment. The practice of combining methods is well-established in the area of validation, and it has been an increasing trend in a number of European countries over the last decade to become commonplace in various countries.

The information collected for the Inventory by national experts also suggest that the portfolio is the most frequently accepted methodology for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (56 mentions in total), followed by interviews, tests and examinations. Debates (21 mentions) and presentations (29 mentions) are the methodologies accepted least often. Moreover, the Inventory chapters suggest that there is a degree of specialisation on the 'acceptance' of different methods in relation to different stages of the validation process. Some methods are used fairly evenly across validation stages: the portfolio method, declarative methods; whereas others are not: for instance, tests and examinations and observations are mainly used for assessment, interviews are widely used for identification and assessment, but not for documentation. Interviews, portfolios and declarative methods

are the most frequently accepted methodologies for the identification of non-formal and informal learning. Portfolios are by far the most frequently accepted methodology for the documentation of non-formal and informal learning, followed by declarative methods, and simulations/ evidence extracted from work. However, when it comes down to assessment tests and examinations become the most accepted methodology, which may disadvantage less favoured groups of learners, in particular those with past damning previous experiences of formal education. Moreover, the thematic report noted the existence of differences in the use of different methods depending on the type of knowledge, skill or competence that is being assessed.

The study of methodologies for the validation of non-formal and informal learning is a key and complex area. This thematic report has been able to go beyond previous analyses in relation to a number of aspects. However, it has been able to provide a first overview in relation to the topics that it covered. Further research is needed on a number of fronts in this area, for instance to further exchanges in the area of methods between the formal and the non-formal/ informal (one obvious setting for this is the assessment of placements as part of formal education studies –see Benett's 1993 study on the validity and reliability of assessments of work-based learning in UK higher education), and to monitor progress and trends in the use of different methods. Further research is also needed to explore a range of other aspects, such as the use of different methods and combinations of methods in various sectors of education and the labour market, to map the use that is being made of emerging ways to gather information for decision-making in the use and effectiveness in the labour market of various forms of validation (for instance through labour market analytics and the analysis of 'big data'), to establish how different combinations of methods are working in practice for various target groups and to more systematically study the effectiveness of different validation methods with the assessment of particular types of skills. The terrain in relation to this area is vast, and expanding.

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