



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

Thematic report: research
themes on validation

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1 Thematic report

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 presents an analysis of research themes in the area of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe for the -roughly- 5 five years period from 2010 to 2014 (when data for 2014 is reported that is based on searches performed in August 2014). Specifically, the report considers, first, the main patterns in research on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe, looking at trends in the number of published works, main outlets for publication and main authors, types of publications, educational levels concerned and intended audience for this research. Second, it looks at the nature and scope of research on validation, referring to the observed balance between theoretical and empirical studies, the methodologies and designs employed in the reported research, countries and sectors covered. The third section reflects upon the main themes in European validation research. This discussion is organised around the following themes: social justice and validation; access to validation; methodological aspects; experiences of the validation process and the outputs and outcomes of validation. The final section presented a summary and conclusions.

1.1 Main patterns in research on the validation of non-formal and informal learning

1.1.1 Introduction

The search for this thematic report was implemented using two bibliographic databases: Web of Science and ERIC. The following search criteria were employed: articles including following key phrases in their titles or abstracts "recognition of prior learning" or "accreditation of prior learning" or "validation of non-formal learning" or "validation of non-formal and informal learning" or "RPL" or "accreditation of prior experiential learning" or "apel" for the period between 2010 to 2014 using ERIC and the Web of Science databases. Complementary searches were conducted in Google Scholar to identify additional articles. These terms are not synonyms. Indeed, the recognition or accreditation of prior learning –for instance- are wider concepts than validation of non-formal and informal learning, since they also include the recognition or accreditation of prior formal learning. This was taken into account in the review of documents, and in this thematic report we frequently refer simply to 'validation' or 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' in reference to the relevant studies.

ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) is an online digital library of education research and information, which provides access to more than 1.5 million records (including citations, abstracts and metadata). The Web of Science, is an online service that provides a comprehensive citation search. Currently, the service on average indexes 65 million items

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.

per year and it is described as the largest accessible citation database. It includes over 23,000 academic and scientific journals. The search in the Web of Science focused on "Education and Educational Research". For this project, the focus was primarily on peer-refereed journal articles.

Further reduction criteria were applied:

1. Articles and publications related to the non-EU countries unless they are exclusively theoretical.
2. Curriculum designs, articles focused on workspace learning and not related articles like project summaries or articles not-focusing on RPL.

A large number of articles in the period covered refer to South Africa and Australia –and to a lesser extent Canada and the USA. The final list meeting the above criteria consisted of around 30 articles, which were examined for this thematic report. They contained information and references from many other works, some of which are also cited in this thematic overview.

It should be noted that analysis presented in the thematic report does not represent a systematic review of all research on validation. Certain search terms and databases have been prioritised. There can be research on validation or of relevant aspects for validation under other terms (for instance assessment, quality assurance or learning outcomes -see Souto-Otero 2012), or in other areas than educational research. The information reported in the section on key data on validation come from the ERIC database. It should be noted that ERIC does not provide details on how it categorises the bibliographic data that it collects. The search and review were conducted in English. While English is increasingly becoming the international language of academia and cutting-edge research, this naturally excludes high quality studies on validation that may have been written in other languages. The review, however, is comprehensive and suggestive of some of the main trends and patterns regarding research in the area of validation, within educational research.

1.1.2 Key data on research on validation

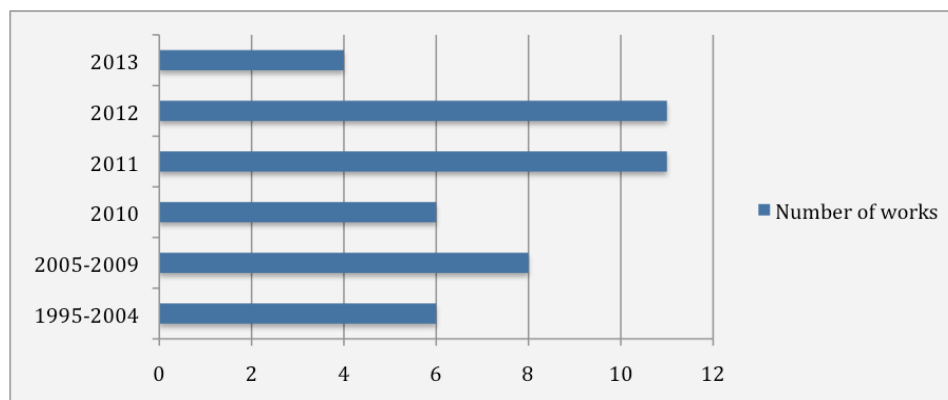
ERIC enables the use of metadata to obtain an insight into trends in research on validation. The following aspects were explored:

- Trends in the number of published works
- Main outlets for publication
- Main authors
- Publication type
- Educational level covered
- Audience

1.1.2.1 Trends in the number of published works

The number of works on validation has been relatively stable over the last twenty years, following a slight upwards trend. While in the period 1995-2004 on average 6 works per year were recorded in ERIC, the figure went up to 8 in the period 2005-2009, and remained there for the period 2010-2013. Two recent years (2011 and 2011) have been substantially above average, with 11 works.

Figure 1.1 Number of works on validation (ERIC database 1995-2013)



Source: ERIC database. Figures for 1995-2004 and for 2005-2009 are yearly averages

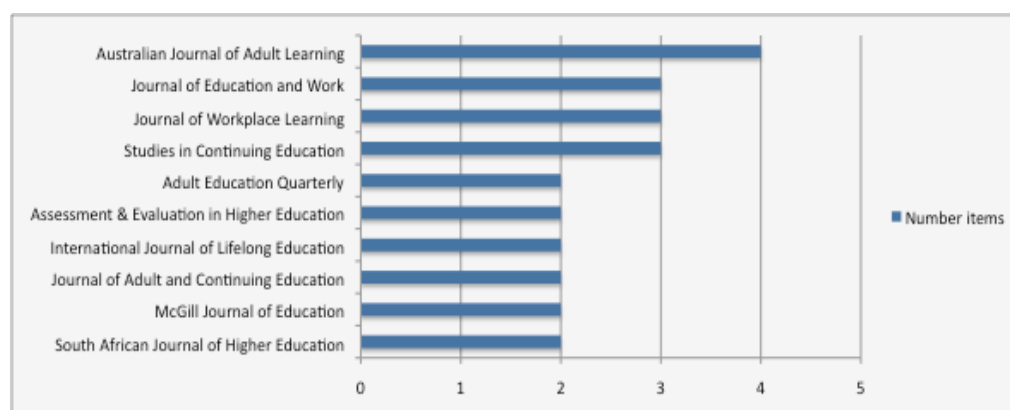
The upward trend is confirmed in a search undertaken in the Web of Knowledge. A search on “recognition of prior learning” (a term that is wider but also more accepted than validation in the literature²) shows that interest in this topic has increased in recent years: from virtually no articles mentioning this term in their title or abstract prior until 2007 to 5-10 articles per year including the term in from 2008.

1.1.2.2 Main outlets for publication

Regarding outlets for publication, as shown in Figure 1.2 research on validation tends to be published in journals that deal with the link between education and work, and adult/ lifelong education. Two higher education journals are also amongst those that have published two or more articles on validation.

Several of these journals are international in terms of their contributors and readership. However, the names of the journals already reveal the comparatively high interest on validation in Australia and South Africa. The first European Journal, and second in the list, is the Journal of Education (edited in the UK).

Figure 1.2 Main outlets for publication on validation (2010-2014)



Source: ERIC database

1.1.2.3 Main authors

In the period 2010-2014 ERIC records six authors that published two to three works on validation of non-formal and informal learning. These give a good indication of wider trends regarding the geographical scope on validation: strong interest in this area in Australia and South Africa, and some parts of Europe. Indeed, in Europe research on validation is generated mainly in Sweden and the UK.

² A search on “validation of non-formal learning” yielded a much lower number of matches.

The authors included in the ERIC search and their affiliations are provided in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 Main authors on validation and their affiliations (2010-2014)

<i>Author</i>	<i>Number of works</i>	<i>Affiliation</i>
Andersson, Per	3	Linköping University, Sweden
Hamer, Jen	3	University of New South Wales, Australia
Sandberg, Fredrik	3	Linköping University, Sweden
Armsby, Pauline	2	University of Westminster, UK
Cameron, Roslyn	2	Central Queensland University, Australia
Cooper, Linda	2	University of Cape Town, South Africa

Source: ERIC

1.1.2.4 *Type of publication*

The types of publications generated by the search were mainly Journal Articles (32). ERIC also classified these works under the following categories (multiple coding possible):

- Reports –research (16)
- Reports –evaluative (11)
- Reports –descriptive (6)
- Informative analysis (2)
- Collected works –general or proceedings (2)

Most of the works registered by ERIC of validation, thus, was research and evaluative work. Nevertheless, there is also a significant presence of descriptive reports, which may point out to the interest within academic outlets to follow developments and experiences in the area of validation.

1.1.2.5 *Educational level*

The data on the educational area of the works on validation reported by ERIC is fairly consistent across time (2010-2014 or historic data prior to 2010). In both cases the ranking is as follows:

3. Higher Education
4. Adult Education
5. Postsecondary Education
6. Elementary secondary schools
7. Secondary Education
8. Other

In fact, research on elementary secondary education/ secondary education is marginal (only 2 works for the period 2010-2014). Post-secondary education research is more frequent, but is nevertheless well behind the top two categories, with around half the works than them. Higher Education and Adult Education dominate most of the research on validation.

Table 1.2 Research on validation, by area of education (2010-2014)

<i>Area of education</i>	<i>Number of works</i>
Higher Education	21
Adult Education	20
Post-secondary Education	12
Elementary Secondary Education	1
Secondary Education	1

Source: ERIC –multiple categories possible.

The relevant articles employed for the production of this thematic report followed this structure by education level. Only two of those articles focused on VET or secondary education, whereas a much higher number focused on higher education or adult education.

The lack of attention to secondary education is surprising, and contrasts with the political priorities in some countries. In Sweden there has been a particularly strong focus on using validation as a means to achieve secondary school certificates (Lundgren 2005).

1.1.2.6 Audience

ERIC does not provide comprehensive information regarding the audience of the works on validation it contains. For illustrative purposes, we can mention that for all works on validation that it contains, practitioners have been the main audience, followed at some distance by teachers, administrators and policy-makers. Students and counsellors have been less often the target audience of research on validation.

1.2 The nature and scope of the European literature on validation: highly concentrated and with notable gaps

1.2.1 The balance between theoretical and empirical studies

Most studies identified are empirical, in line with the argumentation by Andersson et al. (2013) who report that traditionally studies on validation have been of an empirical nature. A contrasting view is reported in the results of a systematic literature review in the area of validation analysed for this report (Stelund 2010), which noted that the majority of research on validation in the period it covered (1990-2007) was of a theoretical character—although the focus of both reviews was somewhat different, focusing on validity issues in validation. That review nevertheless noted a more recent increase in empirical studies. In the review undertaken for this thematic report, most studies concentrated on the analysis of actual policies or practices in the area of validation.

1.2.2 Methodology and design

Most of the studies reviewed were case studies. Most studies presented one case study. The use of comparative case studies was low by comparison. Several conducted an analysis of policy documents, institutional documents and undertook discourse analysis. Those studies making use of primary data collection tended to rely on interviewing. Only one study that provided a systematic review of the literature. Very few studies relied mostly on quantitative analysis, or on large samples or adopted an experimental or quasi-experimental design. This highlights a number of gaps (comparative research, literature review, quantitative analysis, experimental and quasi-experimental designs) in the education and educational research literature on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

1.2.3 Countries covered

As already advanced, when the articles selected had a geographical focus in a European country, they tended to cover Sweden and the UK. By contrast, there was little representation of other countries. Regarding Southern Europe, Portugal (principally), Spain and France were represented. Denmark and Norway were also represented in some studies. Estonia and Romania were the Eastern European countries most often represented. Thus, there is a marked geographical focus in relation to the academic study of validation, which excludes most European experiences.

1.2.4 Sectoral aspects

It is interesting to note that most studies do not have a sectoral focus. This is partly the result of the theoretical focus of much research on validation. However, when sectoral aspects are taken into consideration, it is clear that a small number of sectors tend to concentrate most of the attention of validation research. In particular the health and care sector is well represented. Other working areas represented included public administration and call centres. In general, there are very few studies with a sectoral focus that address the area of agriculture or manufacturing. This would be suggestive of the importance of validation for the service sector economy and in particular to the expanding health and care sector, and the well-established research tradition in those sectors regarding the study of the importance and role of learning outcomes in health-related education.

1.3 Themes in the analysis of validation

This section presents an overview of the main themes studied in the European validation literature. The review is organised in relation to:

- Social justice and power relations in validation
- Access to validation
- Methodological aspects
- Experiences of the validation process
- The outputs and outcomes of validation

A few studies had a focus outside these main themes. This is the case of Cavaco et al. (2014) work on 'governance' and the influence of the EU policies and agenda on validation on Member States –using Portugal and France as examples.

1.3.1 Social justice

One of the main themes in the study of validation in Europe is social justice. This is often presented as one of the main aims of validation (Sandberg 2011). The social justice theme is most often related to the widening of participation in higher formal education levels, and to the recognition of the knowledge, skills and competences that socially disadvantaged groups face. Social justice is most often associated in this literature with social integration and self-development but, interestingly, not so much with economic integration and participation in the labour market. In fact, the logics of social justice and economic integration are often presented as in tension, if not incompatible.

Reviewing the situation in Portugal, Guimarães (2012) and Fragoso and Guimarães (2010) argue that while validation is considered a significant lever for widening participation in education and promoting social justice by extending access to sectors of the population that have acquired knowledge and skills outside of formal education contexts, its potential for social justice is hampered by an insufficient focus on learning and on the motivations of those undertaking validation. Too much focus on the discrete certification of specific competences, validation for economic development, measurement, standardisation and validation as a 'duty' (or a 'false right to education and training') to meet technical requirements (Barros 2009) at the expense of greater concern with social justice to "change people' lives" (Guimarães 2012:72). Barros (2013:430) even goes on to say, based on her review of the Portuguese experience that an initial humanistic ethos in validation in that country changed under the recent mainstreaming of RPL into what can be seen as a tool for re-classification of individuals and a "strategic device whose social purpose was more about constructing a new invisible form of exclusion than an innovative way of inclusion".

Diedrich (2013a) reviews validation of the knowledge of immigrants in Sweden in the context of a labour market project run by municipal and state organisations in Western Sweden in the period 2006-2008 –targeting 500 immigrants. The study reports difficulties in the validation process that derive by the emphasis of the project on procedural efficiency rather than on a more comprehensive understanding of the heterogeneous nature of immigrants' skills. Diedrich concludes that "The practice of running labour market projects aimed at supporting target groups identified to have a weak position on the labour market tends to create structures that cater for the needs of the project, not the needs of the persons targeted by the project" (Diedrich 2013a:567; Diedrich 2011), as projects are ephemeral and the relationships and actions that they build are not stable. The author acknowledges that its results are specific to a particular institutional setting of a project, and may not be generalisable to other contexts or fields (e.g. validation in HE), but argues that similar results may be expected "from studies of other processes of organizing that seek to enact their particular version of validation as a tool for promoting social equality" (Diedrich 2013a:567). Gibbs and Armsby (2011) discuss the link between experience and qualifications through APL/ APEL, and argue that experience and success deserve recognition, but not necessarily transformation into credentials. They advocate what they call a more 'humanistic form of recognition where experience is valued as a superior contribution to the workplace, that may need help in realising, but does not need to be converted or stolen from its essence to satisfy the consumerist need through the power of credentialism' (Gibbs and Armsby 2011:390).

Sanséau and Ansart (2013) cite Besson (2008), who reports that contrary to what the law expects, in France the VAE system does not benefit primarily the low skilled, but people in managerial positions and intermediate labour market positions, who make up for 80% of the users. As such, many certifications resulting from VAE procedures are at the level of master, license and professional licence (they each account for approximately 20% of the VAE

applications), in particular in the areas of economics, management and social, economic and administrative sciences (DEPP 2011).

Sandberg (2010) suggests that validation processes tend to overlook cleavages based on power, gender and class. These issues, the author contends, should be included in research on validation if validation is not to be systematically and uncritically analysed.

1.3.2 Access to validation

Linked to the previous topic are discussions on access to validation initiatives. These could be divided into studies looking at how to increase access to validation (for instance through better marketing), studies that look at the actual take-up of validation and studies that look at the barriers to access validation and how these could be overcome.

There has been very little research on marketing of validation initiatives or how to reach target groups. Some research has focused, during the period under review, on actual access to validation, although as mentioned in the synthesis report of the Inventory data on this is patchy at best in most European countries (see also Hawley et al. 2010). This limits the volume of research that can focus on this topic. Guimarães' (2012) reports a significant increase in access to validation for adult learners in Portugal following the adoption of the 'New Opportunities' initiative in 2005. 'New Opportunities' centres were set up by different entities (public schools, training centres, NGOs, municipalities, professional schools, enterprises, etc.) provided that they were accredited, which expanded the availability of validation opportunities in the country.

There is more research that focuses at least partly on existing barriers to validation and how to overcome them. Stenlund (2010) proposes that less time is devoted to the assessment of non-formal and informal learning than to the assessment of formal learning, but staff in HEIs consider the former to be time-consuming and complicated. Thus, universities often lack real commitment to tackling issues of widening access and that changes in organisation cultures might be needed for validation to be successful. Valk (2009) reviews a series of obstacles for widening accreditation of prior experiential learning practices, and highlights four as being of particular importance: the general focus of HE provision on input-oriented and process based education (rather than a focus on learning outcomes), staff attitudes ('knowledge not acquired in my classes is not good enough', which is problematic when validation takes place at the course level and is implemented by individual members of staff), staff workloads (which direct the attention of staff to more pressing issues that affect more students) and financial considerations (validation may create significant 'non-traditional' work in exchange for not much additional income, in an era of finance constraints in which universities are encouraged to become financially self-sufficient). The author advocates greater regulation of validation at national level, the setting up of national qualifications frameworks, better dissemination of information to end-users, flexibilisation of curricula, a shift to learning outcomes and greater staff (teachers, academic counsellors, assessors) training and development as ways to ease these barriers.

Scott (2010) nevertheless argues that APEL as a field is over-theorised and under-practiced, and that we lack rigorous studies that establish the true reasons for low levels of uptake – which he tentatively relates to epistemological difficulties, values of providers and employers and ambiguous financial benefits to institutions. In particular, more cost-benefit analyses are needed.

1.3.3 Methodological aspects

Methodological aspects per se feature relatively low in the European education and education related literature. Much research is conducted on the assessment of knowledge, skills and competences, more generally, that is of value for discussions on validation. However, the specific literature on the methodological aspects of validation has been scarce in the period from 2010 until present, in particular outside of higher education research.

An exception is Stenlund (2010) that provides a literature review on the assessment of prior learning in higher education, from a validity perspective, looking at different dimensions of this concept. The review concludes that there is a need for greater consistency in the procedures of validation both in and among universities and education programmes, as

some claimants are disadvantaged, depending on what university or faculty they choose, and on the instruments employed in the validation process. Clear guidelines to institutions could help in this respect. The review also observes that validation has two main purposes in HE: access (which aims to predict whether the individual will be successful in their studies) and gaining credit (where the goal is to establish an equivalence between a pre-existing course or a part of an educational programme and the prior learning on an individual). From this observation the article suggests that two assessment designs of validation procedures may be required in higher education. Moreover, the study notes, there have been few attempts to study how claimants experience or respond to different models of validation practices. Further research is also required on whether assessment influences assessors' and claimants' perceptions of the value of validation, and on whether this perception –in turn– influences assessment outcomes.

Stenlund (2013) examines the validity of admission into higher education decisions based on assessment of prior learning, based on a sample of approximately 600 applicants who used APL in order to receive admission to, and credits in the vocational teacher education programme in Sweden. The article concludes that existing APL practice needs improvement in order to obtain validity and trustworthiness in the decisions made in relation to APL. In particular it draws attention to significant differences between experts' recommendations and HEIs' decisions, and variations in the reliability of assessment between institutions. Differences between groups, genders and those with and without experience as vocational teachers were also reported in the analysis of decisions.

In the only study of validation identified in this literature review that referred specifically to doctoral studies (a professional doctorate programme) Armsby (2012) contends that HE professionals are still unclear or have different views regarding how experiential learning and formal learning can be conceptualised and assessed, and that in the case of the doctoral programme that she studied examiners' expectations of what constitutes "scholarship" and "research skills" in a practice-based doctorate is worth of further investigation. Interestingly, Armsby also notes that in the doctorate that she analysed APEL is a tool for development rather than for credentialism, giving participants a perspective on their practice-based learning and basis to plan their future as practitioners and to challenge their current practices, which contrasts with much of the discussions about validation and social justice reported earlier in this review.

Joosten-ten Brinke et al. (2010), building on the experience of ten assessors from the Open University of the Netherlands, explore assessors' approaches to the assessment of "prior informal and non-formal learning" through portfolios –the most common method for validation. They study decision-making processes, perception of portfolio use, deciding factors in the assessment and use of rating criteria. They present in detail the steps for portfolio assessment at the Open University of the Netherlands and report that assessors have mixed perceptions in relation to the fairness of APL assessment. Three of the assessors believed that it was unfair to make decisions based solely on the basis of the portfolio (candidates may fail to link their experience to the learning objectives of a course, lacked academic writing style or wrote ambiguously), whereas other assessors took the opposite view, stating that this was an important advantage as avoided biases that can be generated when the person being assessed meets the assessor. Assessors, moreover, regard evidence in combination with sound argumentation (rather than evidence alone) as the deciding elements in the assessment of portfolios. They also reported that the criteria used can be difficult to judge or even interpret, and underlined the role of intuition in parts of the judgment of some assessment criteria. While additional research is needed on assessors' perceptions and approaches, the article concludes that if we accept the role of interpretation and trust the competences of the assessors, portfolios will enjoy a positive future. Pokorny (2013) focuses on the preparation of claims for APEL through portfolios –"the dominant assessment tool for APEL in the UK" (Pokorny 2013:519)-, based on interviews with four higher education students who achieved APEL credits and the four tutors who assessed them. She documents how tutors adapt the APEL process to meet their needs and affect students' sense of agency and professional and personal identity. She defends a dialogic approach to assessment (see also Ruiz-Primo 2011) to promote APEL and mutual understanding between students and tutors, and to open up the academy to "new sites of knowledge" (Pokorny 2013:518).

Some studies have also continued to look at the role that technology can play in re-shaping methodological practices. This is the case of Cameron's work on the role of e-portfolios in the recognition of workplace learning (recognition of prior learning (e-RPL) and achievement of professional recognition (e-PR), as key components of continuing professional development³). The article includes implications for the matching of tasks and practices to different types of e-portfolio based RPL and PR, with varying degrees of learner control. While the study focuses on Australia, it includes some references to developments in the UK. On the other hand, no studies were found on self-assessment or peer assessment in validation processes (see Boud et al. 2013 for self-assessment benefits in formal education), except a study on a self-evaluation tool implemented as part of a Leonardo project at the University of Catania (Piazza 2013).

Other studies provide descriptions of validation practices and their main steps (Guimarães 2012:72; Sandberg 2011:9-14) but the technical assessment of validation methodologies is not their core concern. A number of studies look at the importance of prior knowledge as an independent factor that might affect learning or competence development, but do not focus explicitly on validation processes. In some cases -like in the case of argumentative competences -studied by Rapanta et al. 2013- the importance of non-formal and informal experiences in the development of those competences is likely to be high.

Recent survey work (CEDEFOP 2014) has started to map the types of competences assessed and the volume of use of validation tools in the private sector, at different points of the employment nexus (e.g. recruitment, human resources management, etc.), finding widespread use of interviews and talks and the screening of documentation such as CVs, certificates, qualifications and references.

1.3.4 Experiences of the validation process

There is a strand of studies on validation that look at the how candidates and assessors experience the validation process. Sandberg (2011) discusses a process of validation that leads to accreditation of prior experiential learning in the form of course credits used in an adult in-service education program for health care assistants at the upper-secondary level in Sweden. This research shows that students do not understand well the validation assessment process and the ways in which their prior learning is transformed into credits. Since this reflects a lack of mutual understanding between teachers and candidates for validation, the author proposes a communicative approach -following Habermasian perspective- to the improvement of validation processes. Sandberg and Andersson (2011) reach similar conclusions.

Stenlund (2010) argues that studies on claimants' perceptions of procedures for the recognition of prior learning in HE have found that claims need to be better prepared for this process. Greater transparency and student involvement are required to enhance the positive consequences of recognition. Greater familiarity with criteria for assessment and process will lead, according to this article, to students' improvement in performance. Sandberg and Andersson (2011) notes that participants in validation procedures in HE can have mystified views of HE -so that the validation procedure is also in fact a learning process regarding knowledge claims in different settings. Stenlund's study also contends that a limitation of many studies on validation in HE is that they express assessors' and claimants' perception of the validation process, not its actual results or consequences for individuals or institutions in HE or the labour market -see also the next subsection in this report.

Berglund and Andersson (2012), based on a study in two companies and two municipalities in Sweden, provide examples of how the knowledge and skills of employees get recognition in the workplace at different stages of the work cycle (recruitment, within the workplace, and on leaving the organisation) and discuss the consequences of that recognition. Their findings underline that companies and municipalities follow their own ways to go about validation,

³ In this study e-RPL is defined as the unique practice of utilising electronic, digital and mobile web connectivity technology to collect and record evidence of prior learning acquired either formally, non-formally or informally or a combination thereof. E-PR is defined as the unique practice of utilising electronic, digital and mobile web connectivity technology to collect and record evidence of prior learning and continuing professional development against the professional standards of a specified profession as determined by that profession's accrediting body.

mostly out of a 'production logic' of what is needed at the workplace. As a result, certain skills are 'unvisualised' for the employee, when this is to the advantage of the employer. They contrast this model with traditional validation models, which –they argue- have the purpose of documenting individuals' knowledge and skills to use such proof of competence to facilitate 'transferability' when presented to different stakeholders. In the workplace, processes are different as the main aim is utilisation rather than transferability (Berglund and Andersson 2012:81).

The Besson (2008) report underlines the volume of loss of candidates at different stages of the VAE process. This could suggest that improvements are required in the system, but also that validation may have other purposes than accreditation, related to personal development, the building of self-confidence or learning pathways.

Fejes and Andersson (2009) review a validation experience in the care sector for elderly people to explore the relation between experience and learning, using an experiential constructivist perspective that allows participants' prior learning to be taken into account as the starting point of the validation process, and also allows peer learning through 'learning conversations' and the creation of new learning.

Diedrich (2013b) focuses on the role of interpreters in validation processes for immigrants who have language difficulties in Sweden. The article directs attention to the importance of this figure during validation processes as interpreters do not only transmit information but are deeply implicated in the construction of knowledge that is judged in the assessment process and is reflected in its results.

A sub-theme within the literature on experiences of the validation process are descriptive studies that 'take-stock' of a particular validation policy or practice, such as Blomqvist et al. (2012) work that includes discussions on quality assurance and validation in higher education, Stanciu and Banciu (2012) study on the relationship between the national qualifications system and validation of formal and non-formal learning in Romania, which shows a lack of connection between the results of validation of non-formal and informal learning and the formal education and qualifications system; or Piazza's (2013) study of the experience of a Leonardo project at the University of Catania.

1.3.5 The outputs and outcomes of validation

Sanséau and Ansart (2013) review the French experience of validation in the HE sector to argue that produces a range of positive outcomes: enables the adoption of individualized learning paths, personal empowerment, self-realisation and shorter training times. Validation also allows a focus on experience - and not just professional experience - that is in tune with today's societal changes and the aspirations/constraints of each individual. Similar analyses of the benefits of validation can be found in a range of other studies (Sandberg and Kubiak 2013).

The Besson (2008) and other reports (DEPP 2011; DARES 2012) on the French situation are amongst the few works that include a quantitative dimension on the outcomes of validation initiatives at the national level. Their results are disappointing, according to Sanséau and Ansart (2013). Of the 60,000 candidates expected per year in the French VAE system, only 26,000 degrees and diplomas were accredited (Besson 2008:10).

The lack of more large empirical studies on the educational and labour market outcomes of validation is surprising. While Stenlund (2010) reported a number of studies that looked at comparisons of the performance of non-APL and APL students and students with formal qualifications during the period 2000 to 2008, this has not been identified as one central aspect of the education and educational research literature on validation during the period 2010-2014. Stenlund (2010) fed back, in relation to this important topic, that most studies report that there is no difference in academic achievement in higher education between APL and non-APL students (Donoghue et al. 2002; Marshall and Jones 2002; Scott 2007; Rapley et al. 2008), which provides re-assurance that procedures for the "admission of non-traditional students can be considered appropriate" (Stenlund 2010:791). As contrary evidence to this overall claim Stenlund mentions the work of Cantwell and Scevak (2004) who reported that students who enter HE after having acquired substantial prior work experience had a belief in simplicity and certainty of knowledge that persisted over time,

suggesting that these students did not question or restructure their belief system, and argued for a preparatory programme for these students before they enter HE. LeGrow et al. (2002) found, on the other hand, that problem solving abilities may in fact be higher for adults receiving credit via assessment of prior learning than for adults completing classroom courses. One cautionary note that should be given is that most of the above research comes from health-related subjects, and in particular nurse education.

Andersson, P., and Fejes, A. (2010) show how the labour market can influence validation policies. Taking Sweden's case, they outline how that country has had a relatively open policy towards refugees in the recent past, which has granted residence permits to a large number of immigrants. Given that these did not go to Sweden as a result of labour shortages and the demand for their knowledge has been moderate, their knowledge is often not recognised in employment in vocations where their prior learning could be utilised, which has raised challenges for policies on the recognition of learning.

1.4 Summary and conclusions

This thematic review has taken stock of research on validation produced in the period 2010-2014. Several patterns, conclusions and gaps can be identified in the review. Regarding the production of research in this area, and based on the analysis of data from the ERIC database, the number of works on validation has been relatively stable over the last twenty years, following a slight upwards trend. Second, research on validation tends to be published in journals that deal with the link between education and work, and adult/ lifelong education. Two higher education journals are also amongst those that have published two or more articles on validation. In Europe research on validation is generated mainly in Sweden and to a lesser extent the UK. By contrast, there was little representation of other countries. Regarding Southern Europe, Portugal (principally), Spain and France were represented. Denmark and Norway were also represented in some studies. Estonia and Romania were the Eastern European countries most often represented. Thus, there is a marked geographical focus in relation to the academic study of validation, which excludes most European experiences. South Africa and Australia are other big players in validation research.

Regarding levels of education, higher education and adult education dominate most of the research on validation. Secondary education features much less prominently in the validation literature. In terms of economic sectors and subjects it is clear that a small number of sectors tend to concentrate most of the attention of validation research. In particular the health and care sector is well represented. In terms of the methodologies employed for the production of validation research, most studies presented one case study. The use of comparative case studies was low by comparison. Several conducted an analysis of policy documents, institutional documents and undertook discourse analysis. Those studies making use of primary data collection tended to rely on interviewing. Only one study that provided a systematic review of the literature. Very few studies relied mostly on quantitative analysis, or on large samples or adopted an experimental or quasi-experimental design. This highlights a number of gaps (comparative research, literature review, quantitative analysis, experimental and quasi-experimental designs) in the education and educational research literature on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Findings in relation to a number of themes were explored in more detail in the report. These are briefly reviewed here, providing particular attention to research gaps. Reflections on social justice tend to be critical of validation, and suggest a mismatch between its inclusive, humanistic rhetoric and what this research sees as a credentialist and labour-market oriented practice. This research also points out to evidence that validation is not used primarily by low skilled. Social justice is most often associated in this literature with social integration and self-development but, interestingly, not so much with economic integration, and participation in the labour market. In fact, the logics of social justice and economic integration are often presented as in tension, if not incompatible. The relationship between these two logics is an aspect that deserves further research.

Regarding access to validation, there has been very little research on marketing of validation initiatives or how to reach target groups. Some research has focused, during the period under review, on actual access to validation, but this remains a weak area hampered by lack

of comprehensive data at the national level. There is, by comparison, more research that focuses at least partly on existing barriers to validation and how to overcome them, although in particular, more cost-benefit analyses are needed.

In relation to methodological aspects, much research is conducted on the assessment of knowledge, skills and competences, more generally, that is of value for discussions on validation. However, the specific literature on the methodological aspects of validation has been scarce in the period from 2010 until present. The best-furnished area of methodological research in relation to validation is higher education, including some examples of large-scale quantitative research. Recent survey work (CEDEFOP 2014) has also started to map the types of competences assessed and the volume of use of validation tools in the private sector, but it still in its initial stages.

There is better availability of research on the experience of the validation process. There is a strand of studies on validation that look at the how candidates and assessors experience the validation process. This research shows that students do not understand well the validation assessment process and the ways in which their prior learning is transformed into credits. Greater transparency and student involvement are required to enhance the positive consequences of recognition. Additional research on the barriers and on efficient ways to achieve this is required. Validation experience research also suggest a number of areas that require close attention, in particular the fact that in employer-driven validation certain skills may be 'unvisualised' for the employee, when this is to the advantage of the employer.

Regarding the outputs and outcomes of validation research undertaken during the period under analysis confirms that validation produces a range positive outcomes. For instance it enables the adoption of individualized learning paths, personal empowerment, self-realisation and shorter training times. However, the lack of more large empirical studies on the educational and labour market outcomes of validation is surprising. It is also worth noting that while a number of studies that looked at comparisons of the performance of non-APL and APL students and students with formal qualifications were produced during the period 2000 to 2008 (showing no significant differences in performance), this was has not been indentified as one central aspect of the education and educational research literature on validation during the period 2010-2014. This is a significant gap, in particular given that the research produced in the previous period was strongly reliant on the experience of the health sector, and it is unclear to what extent its conclusions will apply more broadly.

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