



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

Final synthesis report

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	European policy in the area of validation	5
3	The current state of play	6
3.1	Overall features of validation systems	6
3.2	What progress has been made on key principles in arrangements for validation?	15
3.3	Access to validation	33
4	Conclusions and challenges.....	39
4.1	Areas where improvement has been experienced	39
4.2	Continuing challenges.....	41
5	References	44
Annex 1	Indicators used to construct Table 3.3	45

1 Introduction

This Synthesis Report¹ forms part of the 2014 update to the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (the European Inventory). This Synthesis Report is accompanied by:

- 36 country reports, covering 33 European countries, and corresponding country fiches, - two fiches were produced for each country, one mapping the situation in 2010 and one in 2014². In this synthesis report and in the executive summary for the project, we often use 'countries' to refer to country reports;
- Two case studies providing examples of validation 'in practice';
- Eight thematic reports³.

National experts collected the data upon which this report is based through desk research and stakeholder interviews in the period September-November 2013. The material contained in the Inventory includes 'hard evidence' – for instance laws or quantitative data collected at the international, national, regional or project level - as well as stakeholders' and experts' views of the state of validation in the countries covered.

The Inventory has undergone a comprehensive quality assurance process. The first drafts of the country reports were shared with the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG); EQF AG representatives provided comments and additional information on their respective countries. In addition, other country experts and Cedefop commented on the reports. This input was processed by the authors of the country reports and sent back to the EQF AG for final review. The reports were, nevertheless, the sole responsibility of their authors.

This synthesis report provides an overview of the main findings of interest to stakeholders, including policy makers and practitioners. It brings together findings presented in the various other project outputs (thematic reports, case studies and on-line survey) in order to provide an overview of progress and trends across the countries covered. It should be noted that the report does not describe 'one single route' to produce successful validation systems, but highlights some of the strengths and tensions faced by different approaches. As noted in the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation, national circumstances need to be taken into account when designing well-performing validation systems.

¹ The contents of this synthesis report –as those of country reports and fiches- cannot necessarily be taken to reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission, Cedefop, the EQF AG Members or the members of the external quality assurance panel. Neither the European Commission nor any person/organisation acting on behalf of the Commission is responsible for the use which might be made of any information contained in this report.

² 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.

³ Skills audits in the public sector, competence assessment, early school leaving, guidance and counselling, awareness raising, multi-level governance, validation methods and research themes.

This report represents a synthesis based, primarily, on the country fiches, and the tables presented throughout this report are based on the descriptors provided in the country fiches unless otherwise stated. The information provided in the country fiches is supplemented by content presented in the country reports and the other project outputs. Certain caveats should be highlighted. The country experts completed the country fiche based on their knowledge of the situation in the country they covered, and the information they presented in their country report. While some of the indicators used in the fiches are of a factual nature (e.g. whether the country has a legal framework to frame arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning or not) many others naturally required a degree of personal judgement in the description of the national situation.

The content of this report has been aligned, as much as possible, to a set of principles in the arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning set out in the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning⁴. The Recommendation defines validation as “*a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard*” and consists of four distinct stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

Overall, varying degrees of progress and development are in operation in many different levels, sectors (e.g. vocational education/training, higher education, the private sector, etc.) and within institutions within the same country. There is also much variation in the situation across countries, and progress has been varied since 2010.

After briefly introducing the European policy in the area of validation in chapter 2, the main body of this report (chapter 3) describes the current state of play across all reviewed countries, covering the following aspects:

- overall features of validation systems;
- progress against key principles in arrangements for validation;
- access to validation;

The conclusions look at main trends and challenges ahead, based on the information presented in the main body of the report.

⁴ Council of the European Union, 2013:C398/1.

2 European policy in the area of validation

Prior to 2010, various steps had been taken to stimulate and guide developments in the area of validation in Member States, including the 2004 Common European principles on identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, the 2006 Council Resolution on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field, the 2008 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, the Council Resolution on European Cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018), and the 2009 European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. These initiatives underlined the importance of validation, supported the design and implementation of high quality validation policies and procedures and facilitated the linkage of learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning and existing qualifications.

Since the production of the last Inventory in 2010, the most important development concerning the European context has been the adoption of the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This calls for Member States to put in place, by 2018, arrangements to enable individuals to have their knowledge, skills and competences acquired via non-formal and informal learning validated, and to be able to obtain “a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences”⁵. The Recommendation allows flexibility in the implementation of validation arrangements and encourages Member States to develop provisions for different stages of validation either separately or in combination. The Recommendation also lays out a number of principles to frame the development of validation.

The Recommendation asks the Commission, in cooperation with Member States, to regularly review the European Inventory and the European Guidelines to support the implementation of validation arrangements. An update to the European Guidelines on validation will be released after publication of the 2014 European Inventory.

⁵ Council of the European Union, 2013:C398/3.

3 The current state of play

This section reviews the current state of play in the area of validation in Europe. It is organised as follows: it first reviews the state of the art regarding some of the central features of validation systems; it then moves on to analyse the progress made in relation to key principles in the arrangements for validation since 2010 and the current level of development in relation to those principles; and finally it examines available data regarding the take-up of validation in Europe.

3.1 Overall features of validation systems

In addition to the key principles discussed in section 3.2, a number of other factors are instrumental for the success of validation system. In this section we discuss the existence of validation strategies and legal frameworks for validation, stakeholder involvement and the use of validation methodologies.

3.1.1 Validation strategies and legal frameworks

Evidence collected as part of the country updates suggests that there has been clear progress with regards to the introduction of national validation policies and frameworks since the last update of the Inventory in 2010, although progress has been so far more modest at the level of implementation. Progress has, moreover, been uneven across countries. This section deals with the existence of strategies/general policies for validation and legal frameworks for validation.

3.1.1.1 *Comprehensive national (or where relevant, regional⁶) strategies for validation*

This section reviews the existence of comprehensive national (or where relevant regional) strategies/policies for validation. This is understood, as a national strategy or policy for validation that:

- is in line with the national qualifications framework;
- has arrangements covering all education sectors;
- has good connections between the different educational sectors, promoting permeability;
- has good connections between validation in the public, private and voluntary sector;
- has concrete measures in place to favour take-up; and
- has measures to ensure the quality of validation procedures.

Rather than being single policy documents, national strategies for validation are typically integrated within broader education strategies/policies – this is the case in Luxembourg, Poland and Finland for example. In at least six countries (France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, the Czech Republic and Norway), the national strategy for validation is outlined in legislation.

⁶ In the text below we often refer to national strategies only, but this is meant to encompass also regional strategies where relevant.

A number of caveats should be highlighted. The classification proposed does not imply that all countries located within a specific category are in the same position regarding validation or that having a national strategy implies a higher level of development or take-up of validation practices. In addition, having a strategy does not necessarily mean that it is enacted – subsequent sections deal with implementation of validation measures more closely. It should also be mentioned that some countries that do not currently have a strategy are engaged in a thorough preparation of one. This is, for example, the case of Austria. However, having a comprehensive national strategy can help to direct efforts and enhance clarity for users and accountability regarding progress.

Countries have different approaches to the creation of national strategies or policies for validation. These can be divided into four main groups:

- Countries with no national (or, where relevant, regional) strategy in place;
- Countries in the process of developing a national (or where relevant, regional) strategy;
- Countries with a national (or where relevant regional) strategy in place, but with certain elements of a ‘comprehensive strategy’ missing;
- Countries with a comprehensive national (or where relevant regional) strategy in place.

As presented in Table 3.1, below, only three countries currently have comprehensive national strategies in place. However, progress is underway in this respect, as thirteen other countries are in the process of developing a strategy in 2014. This compares to five in 2010. In part, this is likely to be as a result of the Council Recommendation on validation and the deadline of 2018 it contained. Additionally, eleven countries have national strategies, in which some elements are missing. Thus, where national strategies are in place, evidence from the country updates reveal certain gaps. For example:

- Lack of measures to promote take-up of validation or too low visibility of the process;
- Low involvement of the voluntary sector and private sector compared with other sectors;
- Weak links between validation activities in the public, private and voluntary sector;
- Lack of integrated strategy covering different sectors of education and training;
- Coexistence of different policies and regulatory frameworks in the same country.

Portugal had a national strategy in place in 2010 which greatly enhanced access, but was not fully comprehensive for all sectors. At the time of writing this report it was in the process of redesigning a comprehensive national strategy. The number of countries that lack a national strategy for validation decreased from 17 countries in 2010 to nine countries in 2014.

Table 3.1 National (or where relevant regional) strategy for validation

Comprehensive strategy in place	Strategy in place but some elements missing
FI, FR, ES	CZ, DK, EE, IT, IS, LU, LV, NO, NL, PL, RO
AT, BE-Flanders, CH, CY, DE, EL, LI, LT, MT, PT, SI, SK, TR	BE-Wallonia, BG, HR, HU, IE, SE, UK- E&NI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales
Strategy is in development	No strategy in place

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation.

3.1.1.2 Sectoral strategies

The 2014 Inventory also explored the existence of national (or where relevant, regional) strategies/policies in different education sectors (HE, VET, adult education, etc.). The information collected in the 2014 Inventory shows that the majority of countries have developed sector-wide strategies in some sectors, but not all. In some cases, validation strategies exist in VET or, less often, adult education, but do not exist or are localised for higher education. Estonia, on the other hand, provides an example of a country where developments are more advanced in HE than in other sectors. A number of countries are in the process of developing sector-wide strategies, for example, Latvia (VET and HE), Hungary (adult learning, HE), Italy (HE, VET), Sweden (adult education) and UK-Scotland (HE).

3.1.1.3 Legal framework for validation

As illustrated below in Table 3.2 four main clusters of countries can be identified regarding the existence of legal frameworks:

- Countries that do not have a legal framework covering validation;
- Countries that have a framework in place relating to other initiatives, also covering validation;
- Countries that have a single framework for validation in place;
- Countries that have multiple frameworks in place covering different sectors.

Table 3.2 Existence of legal frameworks for validation

Single legal framework for validation	Multiple frameworks in place covering different sectors
FR, MT, TR	AT, BE (Flanders & Wallonia), BG, CH, CZ, DK, FI, ES, EE, DE, IT, LT, LV, LU, NL, NO, PL, SE, SI
IS (Adult education), IE, HU (HE, Adult education), PT (HE and non-HE), RO, SK	CY, EL, HR, LI, UK (E&NI, Wales, Scotland)
Legal framework for other initiatives also covers validation	No legal framework covering validation

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation.

The majority of countries have multiple frameworks (e.g. from VET, school and higher education Acts that enable formal education and training institutions to recognise learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and

informal settings) covering different education sectors – although not necessarily all. Only three countries have a single legal framework. As is the case with strategies, the creation of validation arrangements does not always imply the creation of better or more developed validation systems – the three countries with a single legal framework are indeed at very different stages of development in terms of validation. Indeed, laws may not be fully implemented, whereas stakeholders may adopt pro-validation measures and practices in the absence of a law.

A disadvantage of having a legal framework is that changing laws may require following demanding processes, and systems without validation laws may be more agile in reacting to changes, in particular compared to countries with multiple frameworks. Multiple frameworks, in particular when they lead to multiple validation processes, can make processes more difficult to understand for the general public, and may make it more difficult to adopt mainstreamed processes, for instance in terms of quality assurance. Only seven countries covered by the Inventory currently lack a legal framework, and in some of these the production of a framework is under development – Croatia, Greece and Liechtenstein are planning the introduction of a single framework. In the UK guidelines are in place, but these are non-binding and application is devolved to the learning provider.

Having a legal framework has some clear advantages for users. One is the legal security regarding entitlements and responsibility that a law should offer to those to whom it concerns. For instance, in Iceland, the Adult Education Act passed in March 2010 has introduced provisions on individual entitlement to the validation of non-formal and informal learning towards credits/units at the upper secondary level. Second, is the clarity that laws should provide – for instance regarding procedures, appeals, proportion of credits that could be claimed through validation, etc. For instance, it is noted in the Romanian report that although school counsellors in that country are highly interested in supporting the validation process for their students, the lack of legal framework and common methodologies to support the validation process makes the work of practitioners more challenging. Belgium-Flanders has multiple frameworks, but it is working towards the production of a more comprehensive framework offering an integrated approach towards recognition of acquired competences in all sectors (except in the sports and socio-cultural sectors). Stenlund (2010) provides a literature review on the assessment of prior learning in higher education and 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 legal frameworks that are rigorously implemented could help in this context.

A further aspect to note is that in-depth discussions on financial sustainability are often absent in existing legal frameworks.

3.1.2 Stakeholder involvement in the design of validation systems

The 2012 Council Recommendation emphasises a range of stakeholders with an important role to play in facilitating opportunities for validation and promotes coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors, as well as between those in other relevant policy areas. Stakeholder engagement is difficult to measure; stakeholders may play a role in the design of specific aspects of validation systems, or some of its sectors (VET, HE, voluntary sector). Stakeholder engagement can range from awareness raising to the design of validation policies, for example those related to assessment, or quality guidelines (including via participation in working groups, committees/boards/councils and consultation processes), or the development of legislation.

In some countries, given their recent development of validation, coordination amongst stakeholders is at an early stage, whereas in others, it is facilitated by a longer history of validation. The size of the country is another relevant factor. In small countries, such as Luxembourg and Malta, country size is reported to facilitate coordination and clarity in the allocation of roles and responsibilities amongst stakeholders.

National experts reported that there is a clear allocation of responsibilities with regard to validation for the majority of countries covered in the 2014 Inventory (BE (Flanders & Wallonia), CY, CZ, DE, DK, EL, FI, FR, IS, IE, IT, LI, LV, LU, NO, NL, PT (HE) SE, TR, UK (Scotland)). In certain countries, it is reported that roles and responsibilities are clear because they are defined by the legal framework and/or set out in guidelines (e.g. in Latvia, Sweden or Finland). In other countries a less clear or efficient allocation of responsibilities was reported (AT, BG, HR, EE, ES, HU, LT, PL, RO, SI, UK (Northern Ireland)). Insufficient information to assess the situation was reported for SK and UK England and Wales.

Different models of coordination exist. In some countries, validation is coordinated by a single actor – often ministries or national agencies. In other countries devolved forms of coordination exist, whereby regional authorities or sectorial bodies assure stakeholder involvement without a strong steer from national level. This is the role of the Chambers of Commerce in Germany.

The remainder of this section provides some insights into the involvement of specific stakeholders in validation: private sector (including social partners), voluntary sector institutions, public employment services and guidance practitioners.

3.1.2.1 Private sector and social partner engagement

The engagement of private sector actors - including social partners - in the development of validation and awareness raising is notable in a number of countries. The private sector contributes in a variety of ways to the development and implementation of validation, as noted below. However, challenges in achieving high levels of engagement of the private sector were reported in some country reports. For instance in Ireland, while some

employers/private sector organisations have been involved through the Skillnets activities, engagement is still contained to a small number of private sector organisations, which jeopardises representativity of this very diverse sector. In Estonia, a lack of interest from employers to be involved in the design of validation measures was identified. Hungary is another example where private sector involvement is very limited; it is reported that there are no structured initiatives, developments, or pilot projects concerning validation in the private sector. In Bulgaria, the level of engagement of employers in validation is also considered low, although it is gradually increasing in the VET sector.

3.1.2.1.1 Production of legislation

The private sector may be consulted during the production of legislation related to validation (e.g. in Belgium-Flanders, France, Denmark, Luxembourg and Spain). For example in Spain, employers and trade unions have a consultative role through the national bodies that advise and participate in the process of developing and implementing validation, such as the General Council for Professional Training and the State Education General Council. The involvement of social partners is high in certain countries where collaboration and discussions between social partners and the government in relation to labour market policy matters is well established. For example, in the Netherlands, social partners, sector organisations and accredited EVC-providers are involved in setting up validation procedures. Social partners take responsibility together with the government in promoting and maintaining a high quality national system for validation and stimulate the use of validation through collective labour agreements.

3.1.2.1.2 Development of standards and assessment procedures

In some countries, the private sector and social partners have a key role to play in both the development of standards and assessment procedures for validation, including:

- the setting up of qualification profiles and learning outcomes (e.g. Croatia, Finland, Switzerland);
- the development of standards for assessment (e.g. Iceland, Switzerland in relation to validation in upper secondary education and higher vocational training);
- the design of competence tests (e.g. Finland; Sweden); and
- the design of quality assurance procedures (e.g. Switzerland).

The form of this engagement can vary from presence in steering groups when new projects of strands of validation are being developed (e.g. Iceland) to engagement in sectoral councils (Croatia, Latvia), qualifications committees (Finland) or similar structures that have a continuous say on validation matters.

In some countries, such as Malta, the enhancement of sectoral representation (through sector skills councils) is expected to aid the input of private sector stakeholders in the development of validation systems. In Sweden specific models (branchmodeller) have been developed for different

sectors of the labour market, such as construction and retail, with inputs from the private sector. These models are used as trade-specific frameworks for the validation of vocational knowledge, skills and competences.

3.1.2.1.3 *Designing their own validation practices*

Examples of firm-based validation processes are widespread in the private sector (Cedefop 2014). These tend to be more structured and sophisticated in large companies (e.g. in Bulgaria, Denmark), to validate competences acquired in the workplace. In Denmark, large enterprises such as 'Post Denmark' and 'Novo Nordisk Scandinavia' use resources on competence development to a high degree. This is not common amongst small enterprises. Validation of prior learning is in use especially in the development of companies and the downsizing of enterprises – to facilitate redeployment in other parts of the economy. The Belgium-Flanders report notes that the range of models and the way they are implemented remains varied and where validation procedures exist, these may not be recognised outside the company or sector.

In Sweden private education providers and business sector organisations can perform a full validation process, following national criteria and guidelines.

It should be noted that the lack of a holistic view in the process of validation is a challenge in the private sector. Berglund and Andersson (2012), based on a study in two companies 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, 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).

3.1.2.1.4 *Promoting awareness*

In many countries, the private sector informs, promotes and raises awareness about validation opportunities (e.g. in Spain, Bulgaria, Iceland, Turkey and the Netherlands). In Iceland, private companies often motivate their employees to participate in validation allowing for flexibility in their working hours during the validation process.

3.1.2.2 *Voluntary sector institutions*

Voluntary sector organisations are amongst the most active users and designers of validation procedures, often of a formative character. The Inventory documents examples of approaches carried out in the voluntary sector to help individuals validate competences gained in voluntary activities,

for example the use of Youthpass certificates. Other specific initiatives including the use of portfolios for volunteers can be found in Austria for instance, Iceland, Spain, Poland and Norway.

They also contribute to promoting the use of validation more generally (i.e. outside their sector). For instance, in Austria, Sweden and Switzerland, voluntary sector stakeholders have contributed or are contributing to drive policy developments in the area:

- In Austria, the voluntary sector is actively involved in developing and implementing the strategy for including qualifications acquired in non-formal or informal learning contexts into the future NQF.
- In Sweden, '*Folkbildning*' is a parallel educational pathway to the formal system, which is considered to be part of the voluntary sector and has strong connections to various NGOs. The '*Folkbildningsrådet*', the National Council of Adult Education, is one of the partners that is consulted by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education regarding validation.
- In Switzerland, many voluntary sector organisations active in the field of equal opportunities, education and training of adults and voluntary work, and have led the way in developing and implementing a large number of validation initiatives.

Yet in some other countries (e.g. Slovenia), it is reported that the voluntary sector is currently not fully consulted by the government as part of the design of validation policies.

In some countries and particularly in Northern Europe (Iceland, Denmark, Sweden), the voluntary sector plays an important role in promoting the use of validation and its delivery, for instance clarifying, wording and documenting their prior learning, including through the use of portfolios.

3.1.2.3 Public employment services

PES play a key role in a number of validation initiatives supporting the unemployed in most of countries reviewed. Typically, PES are not involved in the design of validation standards. Its main role is to facilitate access to validation opportunities to their users. This includes skills audits for jobseekers and summative approaches to validation.

Concerning summative approaches leading to formal qualifications, PES generally do not implement validation themselves, but may provide financial support to individuals to foster the use of validation procedures (for instance in the Netherlands or France) or provide guidance and support concerning validation.

3.1.3 Validation methods

The Council Recommendation underlines the importance of the use of solid and trusted validation 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.

Traditional assessment is often employed for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, because many of the procedures and initiatives for validating belong to the formal education system and/or aim at a formal education and training qualification. However, methods are often combined to enhance the reliability and robustness of the assessment in validation (Souto-Otero, 2010). There is nevertheless a degree of specialisation on the 'acceptance' of different methods in relation to different stages of the validation process. Portfolios are by far the most frequently accepted methodology in documentation, followed by declarative methods, and simulations/evidence extracted from work. But 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.

Some reports noted greater experimentation in the methods for validation of non-formal and informal learning at higher education levels. The Cyprus Inventory report suggests that exams are often the only method to validate learning at lower levels of education, whereas greater diversity of tools (observation, declarative and conversational methods, etc.) are used in combination with exams for higher levels. The Inventory shows that when thinking about the methods to use, it is important to keep in mind the nature of the knowledge, skills or competences to examine, but also that the quality of assessment is not "an inherent, immutable characteristic of a particular instrument". Differences in the reliability of methods of assessment strongly depend on the time employed in the testing.

Mirroring the results of the Inventory, the literature notes the need for greater consistency in the use of validation methodologies. Existing practices need improvement in order to obtain validity and trustworthiness in the decisions made, as there are significant differences between experts' recommendations and HEIs' decisions, variations in the reliability of assessment between institutions, and examiners.

Regarding the private sector, the use of 'classic' methods for validation:

- certificates, qualifications, references and one's CV to attest competences, and
- interviews and talks to demonstrate those and possible 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 – see also Cedefop, 2014. Work samples and observations are also widely used. There is much less use of assessment centres, 360 degree feedback, simulations and exercises and psychometric tests/ questionnaires. Thus, the methods less used in the labour market are those closer to assessments/exams used in the education system. Whether this is because both systems complement each other in this way or whether this is a sign of mismatch between for sectors is an area to explore further.

3.2 What progress has been made on key principles in arrangements for validation?

Table 3.3 provides information on a number of indicators on specific areas of interest for the implementation of the key principles outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation⁷. The level of development, as reflected in the indicators available from the Inventory country fiches produced by country experts, is expressed by the number of countries in each category as determined by the experts reporting on each country. It should be noted that the Recommendation is not prescriptive regarding how progress or achievement should be measured in relation to the principles it outlines. The information provided is one possible interpretation of the degree of development on the principles outlined in the Recommendation, based on available information. Validation systems are complex and often, within each country, several arrangements coexist, which makes it difficult to generalise at the country level. Nevertheless, the discussion aims to provide information for illustrative purposes and to facilitate exchanges and the identification of potential areas for action. It should not be read as a final assessment of the current state of development in the achievement of the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation.

In Table 3.3, the difference between the number of countries in each category in 2014 and 2010 is provided in brackets⁸ (a positive number means that more countries are in that category in 2014). An estimation of the degree of development in the achievement of that principle is provided in the table columns. Regarding countries' individual performance, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Slovakia and Turkey are amongst the countries where urgent action was needed in a greater number of principles according to national experts. Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland and Portugal were amongst those countries where a high number of principles were reported as having achieved good development. Countries like Norway, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Estonia, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and UK (Wales) also reported a high degree of development in relation to the indicators used.

⁷ Details on the specific indicators used to construct the table are provided in Annex 1.

⁸ The numbers in brackets add up to +2, given that in 2010 no information was collected for UK-Wales and CH (thus information from 24 rather than 36 reports was available for 2010).

Table 3.3 Progress towards key principles in arrangements for validation (2010-2014)

	Trends –number of countries			
	Good development	Efforts need to be stepped up	Urgent action is needed	No information
IAG on benefits, opportunities and procedures	12 (+7)	14 (=)	5 (-6)	5 (+1)
Guidance and counselling is readily accessible	19 (=)	9 (+4)	4 (-3)	4 (+1)
Links to NQFs and in line with EQF	19 (+7)	17 (-1)	0 (-4)	0 (=)
Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	20 (+6)	13 (-4)	2 (+1)	1 (-1)
Transparent QA measures are in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment	15 (+4)	13 (+2)	8 (-3)	0 (-1)
Provision is made for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors	7 (+1)	2 (=)	26 (+3)	1 (-2)
Synergies between validation and credit systems (ECTS and ECVET)	27 (+6)	5 (-1)	4 (-3)	0 (=)
Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	8 (+3)	12 (+2)	12 (-4)	4 (+1)
Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit' within 6 months of an identified need	0 (n.a.)	17 (n.a.)	19 (n.a.)	0 (n.a.)
The use of EU transparency tools is promoted:				
■ Europass Framework	7	10	13	6
■ Youthpass	3	8	17	8

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation. Key= (n.a.) information not available. Data on performance comes from the country fiches and country reports (see annex 1)

Below we offer additional information regarding each of these principles.

3.2.1 Information, advice and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures

3.2.1.1 Main points

The provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) on the benefits, opportunities and procedures of validation is an important arrangement to ensure the success of validation. National experts reported on the extent to which guidance practitioners are aware of validation. The results suggest that in around a third of the countries⁹ covered by the Inventory most guidance practitioners are aware of validation, a very significant improvement over the situation in 2010. However, in 19 countries awareness was reported as medium¹⁰ or low¹¹. In this area (as well as in the links between validation and

⁹ BE-Wallonia, BG, CY, EE, FI, FR, IS, LU, NL, PL, SI, TR

¹⁰ IE, LI, UK-Scotland, AT, DE, DK, HR, IT, LV, MT, NO, RO, SE, CH

the NQF; the focus on disadvantaged groups and the use of transparency tools) the number of countries for which no data was provided was relatively high, by comparison to other areas.

3.2.1.2 Additional information

Since 2010 a range of actions have also been taken to improve awareness – in particular through the use of websites, but this is an aspect that requires more intensive action in the future. Many people are not aware of the possibility to validate their non-formal and informal learning. A German research project conducted in 2012¹² found that 54% of respondents who were going through or had completed the validation process had found information about it ‘by accident’.

As illustrated in Table 3.4 below, the level of awareness among the general public is low or relatively low in the vast majority of countries covered by the 2014 Inventory.

Table 3.4 Awareness of validation opportunities amongst the general public

Most of the general public	Part of the general public
FI	CZ, EE, LV, NO, PL, UK-Scotland
AT, BE (Wallonia & Flanders), BG, CY, DE, HR, IE, IS, MT, NL, TR, SE, SI, UK (E&NI).	HU, IT, LT, RO, SK
A small part of the general public	A very small minority of the public

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation. Notes: Based on the view of national experts regarding the question: “How is the level of awareness on validation amongst the general public in your country?”. No information or author’s estimates are available for ES, EL, FR, PT, LU, UK-Wales.

Causes for low levels of awareness include:

- The development of validation is still very recent, for instance in Italy, Malta, Slovakia or Turkey;
- There are relatively few initiatives to enhance the awareness of validation practices amongst the general public (e.g. in Romania) or a lack of nation-wide promotion to date (e.g. in Italy);
- The concept is not widely disseminated since validation processes are only open to a specific target group in several sectors (e.g. certified trades in Iceland);
- There is a lack of lifelong learning culture and the concept of validation in particular is not understood by the general public (e.g. Lithuania).

Only Finland reported a high level of awareness among the general public of validation procedures. It also has a relatively high take-up of validation. There are a number of factors that contribute to this. Culturally, validation has a relatively long history in that country. Validation procedures are embedded

¹¹ BE-Flanders, HU, LT, SK, UK-ENI

¹² See Schreiber/ Gutschow/ Weber-Höller/ Gei, 2012, p. 21

in formal qualification structures in HE and VET where Competence Based Qualifications are long established, attracting large numbers of users.

Types of awareness raising campaign employed in Europe range from multi-channel campaigns to campaigns focussing on a sector or target group delivered through sector networks or membership organisations. It is important to use a combination of channels to support awareness-raising, rather than focus on a single awareness raising tool. Some countries (such as Scotland) use a targeted approach to awareness raising, providing tailored information with different target audiences in mind. Approaches to awareness raising on validation in Europe observed in the Inventory include:

- Websites: Most countries have Ministerial websites (Education or Employment) where information about validation is provided. Some countries, like Italy¹³ and Denmark, have developed those in recent times. Sometimes the information on websites is of a very practical nature (in Romania showing a map of the location of Assessment Centres in the country). Other times it outlines the benefits and processes of validation;
- National campaigns using networks and multipliers: Some countries – in particular those with mature validation systems (such as France, Portugal, Norway) - use national bodies to organise regular information sessions on validation for counsellors/advisors/practitioners working in the field of vocational guidance, labour market services and social inclusion. This enhances awareness of validation through the use of multipliers. European networks also play a role. In Romania the Euroguidance network has promoted the role of validation in the formal educational system amongst the school counsellors' network. Embedding information about validation in other awareness-raising campaigns is more rare;
- National campaigns using media: Campaigns using networks and multipliers require the use of existing infrastructure for validation, which is not available in all countries. When such infrastructure does not exist or when policy-makers want to cast a broader net of beneficiaries of the awareness-raising activity, media campaigns are used. These have included viral videos promoting the benefits of validation of prior learning, broadcasts on national TV and on the Internet. Such campaigns can result in significant increases in the number of individuals requesting information on the validation process;
- Use of learning providers: In several cases, such as the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), and Ireland there is no centrally-organised approach; awareness raising is delivered by the individual learning providers which offer validation opportunities. In Finland there is a concerted programme of activity to raise awareness in the HE sector; student guidebooks refer to validation opportunities and HEIs have improved guidance and increased staff competences for those involved in validation;

¹³ The website can be accessed here: <http://librettocompetenze.isfol.it>

- Use of employers: although examples in this respect are limited (for an example see the report for Cyprus); and
- Project-based awareness raising: In countries such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Iceland where there is no uniform system for validation, awareness-raising activities are often arranged and implemented within specific projects rather than at a wider national level.

Whilst most of the country reports demonstrate that activities are taking place to raise awareness of the importance and availability of validation of informal and non-formal learning (to a greater or lesser degree), there are still some examples, such as Greece and Slovakia, where this is not taking place.

Going beyond awareness raising, there are also different models to organise the management and provision of broader information, advice and guidance on validation:

- A central body providing information, advice and guidance for the different stages of validation (e.g. Norway, Spain, Turkey);
- Use of regional structures (Italy, France);
- Formal network of career counsellors located at the Lifelong Learning Centres (Iceland);
- While some involvement of providers in IAG is present in all countries, many countries – Luxembourg or Austria are examples - rely primarily on individual education and training providers, or providers of validation, for IAG tasks. Finland is more prescriptive than most other countries in this respect, as in IVET it is a legal obligation of the provider to include guidance counselling in VET programmes;
- PES have a key role in IAG in most countries, but greater training is required as their focus tends to be on assessment of skills and matching with current demands, and less so with effective training.

IAG can also be accessed by means of other organisations, such as municipalities, chambers of commerce or trade unions in most countries. Given the various levels at which IAG may be provided it is important that there is strong coordination of networks with providers, but this is a challenging aspect - as noted for instance in the Danish report. Coordination is important because while individual centres will have specific information regarding their validation procedures, central or regional organisations are better positioned to guide individuals who need an overview of the different possibilities, or streams, for validation available in the country.

The organisation of IAG through a single organisation makes coordination and the implementation of new measures simpler, but relies on the need for this organisation to be very established and well-known amongst potential users. IAG at the provider level enables greater proximity with the target group, but also leads to great variation regarding IAG. Reliance on one single organisation faces further challenges in that they both, in practice are rarely supported by structures that make mutual learning, experimentation and the identification of good practice possible. Such learning is more common in networked models.

One of the key challenges for those designing and delivering guidance provision is how to identify and categorise the target groups and reach ever-increasing numbers of individuals in a cost-effective and efficient way. In this context IAG delivered online has gained increasing prominence since 2010 – for instance in the Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal and the UK. But not all individuals can benefit equally from online IAG due to access and skills issues. To address this challenge, careers services in some countries have adopted an approach of “differentiated service delivery systematic approaches to customer segmentation, and proactive marketing of services”¹⁴. Other countries have adopted such segmentation approach, even if this has been done to a lesser extent.

3.2.2 Guidance and counselling is readily accessible

3.2.2.1 Main points

Guidance and counselling are also necessary along the whole process when undergoing validation, in order to provide support to the individual in every step of the way. This is an area in relation to which there has not been a significant improvement over the situation in 2010. In 19 countries information and counselling was reported to be available for all aspects of validation¹⁵, and this is publicly available and financed, the same number as in 2010. In 9 countries¹⁶ publicly financed information and counselling was reported to be available for certain aspects of validation only, whereas in four countries¹⁷ no publicly financed counselling was reported to be available.

3.2.2.2 Additional information

There is a strand of studies on validation that look at the how candidates and assessors experience the validation process. This research shows that learners do not understand well the validation assessment process and the ways in which their prior learning is transformed into credits (Sandberg 2011), and that there is a lack of mutual understanding between teachers and candidates for validation (Stenlund 2010; Sandberg and Andersson 2011). Greater familiarity with criteria for assessment and process will lead, according to this article, to students’ improvement in performance. 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, as noted below in this section. Additional research on the barriers and on efficient ways to enhance understanding of validation is required.

In terms of modes of delivery, IAG can take place on a one-to-one basis or by means of group meetings, and this is still frequently the case, with advice

¹⁴ Watts, A.G. *Careers Wales: A Review in an International Perspective* Welsh Government, 2009 the report can be found [here](#)

¹⁵ UK-ENI, BE-Wallonia, IS, NL, TR, SI, BG, IE, DK, MT, SE, FI, CY, LV, LU, ES, FR, DE, CH

¹⁶ LI, IT, CZ, EE, PL, UK-Scotland, NO, EL, BE-Flanders

¹⁷ HU, SK, RO, LT

being given either at the provider level or by personnel in education or public employment services. It can also take the form of written documents (guides, handbooks) or e-learning resources/virtual learning environments.

There is also a need to provide more training to IAG staff on validation. In order for guidance counselling to be delivered to a consistent level of quality and in a standardised way, at the heart of the approach must be a common understanding amongst staff of the way validation is carried out, which can be developed through professional development programmes. But professional training is relatively scarce. A much more common approach is to support participation through the production of resources, for example guidelines concerning provisions.

3.2.3 Links to NQF and in line with EQF

3.2.3.1 Main points

Nineteen country reports¹⁸ documented that learning acquired through non-formal or informal learning can be used to acquire a qualification on the NQF and/ or can be used to access formal education covered in the NQF. These links may have been established in a more or less systematic way in different countries. As such, in some countries they will only apply in relation to some qualifications - meaning that there is greater scope for development of the link between NQF and validation-, whereas in a smaller proportion of countries the link is more developed – for instance, the NQF is populated with qualifications at all levels, and these qualifications can by and large be obtained through validation. In all countries (17)¹⁹ in which such links had not yet been put in place, their establishment was under discussion. Some of these countries do not yet have an operational NQF in place.

3.2.3.2 Additional information

Countries are at different stages in the development of their NQFs, and this necessarily reflects in their linkage to validation. Validation has normally been one of the topics of discussion in the development of NQFs and national and international documents outlining the NQFs explicitly indicate as one of its objectives the improvement of validation arrangements. The link between NQFs and validation, in some cases, may only be implicit and in draft form, pending further developments of the NQF (CY, ES, FI, IT, LT, SI, HR), or may refer to only few qualifications (CZ, LV, PT, SI). In other cases the link is very tight. In France, the validation system is integrated in the NQF. A qualification can only be registered in the national qualifications repertory – which is the bases of the NQF, if it is open to validation. In all UK countries the link is also tight.

¹⁸ CY, CZ, EE, FI, HR, IE, LU, LV, MT, SI, DK, FR, IT, LT, NL, PT, UK-ENI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales

¹⁹ AT, BE-Wallonia, BE-Flanders, BG, CH, DE, EL, ES, HU, IS, LI, NO, PL, RO, SE, SK, TR

Table 3.5 Links between validation and the NQF

Validation can be used to access formal education programmes or acquire formal qualifications covered by NQF	Link between validation and NQF is under discussion
CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, FR, HR, IE, IT, LU, LV, LT, MT, NL, PT, SI, UK (E&NI, Wales, Scotland)	AT, BE-Wallonia, BE-Flanders, BG, CH, DE, EL, ES, HU, IS, LI, NO, PL, RO, SE, SK, TR

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation. Notes: In Finland, there is formally no NQF with a legal status yet, but the legislation concerning different education levels embraces validation. The NQF in Croatia foresees a possible link with validation, which needs to be further developed in terms of additional legal framework. In CZ, not all the qualifications on the NQF can be acquired through validation, only those 'vocational qualifications' listed on the NSK (qualification register). In IT the law is recent and not yet fully operational.

In several countries NQFs only/mainly include qualifications obtained through the formal education system, without similar coverage of other qualifications (for example those granted by private bodies, or regulated by labour market agencies). In addition, the validation procedures for the acquisition of all NQF qualifications may not necessarily be well established. The linkage to NQFs thus needs to be further refined in many countries.

3.2.4 Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to those of qualifications obtained through formal education programmes

3.2.4.1 Main points

Twenty country reports²⁰ noted that at least in some sectors qualifications and part qualifications acquired through validation comply with agreed standards that are the same or equivalent to those obtained through formal education programmes. This means that the qualifications awarded through validation can be identical to those obtained through formal education programmes or be different qualifications of an equivalent standard – at least in some sectors. As such, in these twenty countries, qualifications obtained through validation may still be different and not of the same standard as qualifications obtained through formal education programmes, in some sectors. A more stringent interpretation of the Council Recommendation principle on equivalence of standards, that could be used in the future to measure progress, is that in order for a country to be ranked as showing a good level of development, equivalence should be the norm in all its education sectors.

Thirteen countries²¹ reported that equivalence had been achieved either in the case of qualifications or part qualifications (but not both) in some sectors. Two countries²² reported that qualifications or part qualifications of the same or equivalent standard to those obtained through formal education

²⁰ AT, BE-Flanders, BG, CZ, DK, FR, IE, LV, LI, LT, LU, MT, NO, PT, SI, ES, CH, UK-ENI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales

²¹ BE-Wallonia, CY, EE, DE, HU, IS, IT, SK, SE, FI, NL, PL, RO

²² TK, EL

programmes cannot be achieved through validation. The reports noted a good degree of progress in this respect in relation to 2010.

3.2.4.2 Additional information

Validation can lead to various results:

- to formal qualifications; this remains more common in the VET sector than in higher education across the countries covered. Concerning vocational qualifications, summative validation approaches are reported in sixteen national chapters²³. Validation procedures leading to the award of a recognised higher education qualification are less common. When formal qualifications are awarded through validation candidates often have to take the same test or examination than participants in a formal education and training programmes. In other countries reviewed (France, Malta, Norway, Slovakia), validation processes differs from the assessment used in formal education although they lead to the same qualification. The picture is complex, as such validation processes may be only possible for some types of formal qualifications and education sectors, or all.
- to qualifications that are different from those awarded by education and training authorities (Cyprus or the Czech Republic). In the Czech Republic, the so-called 'vocational qualifications' listed in the register of qualifications (NSK) relate to the national occupational standards developed in the National Register of Occupations (NSP). The qualifications in the NSK are not part of the formal initial VET system, although they use as a basis the same competence descriptions of qualifications as formal initial VET. NSK qualifications can be obtained through an assessment of competences of the candidates. Candidates who have obtained NSK qualifications via this method and wish to obtain the related formal VET qualification, can do so by sitting the final assessment without having to undergo a formal training programme.
- to some form of formal certification without being a qualification. This certificate can sometimes be used towards a qualification but also carries an independent value in the labour market. For example, the outcome of the validation procedure is proof of acquired competences ('*bewijs van bekwaamheid*') in Belgium-Flanders; a skills certificate in Belgium-Wallonia (*VDC procedure*) and an experience certificate (*Ervaringscertificaat*) in the Netherlands.
- to access formal education and training courses – often higher education²⁴- in around half of the countries reviewed.

²³ AT, BE-Wallonia, BE-Flanders, BG, CZ, DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, LT, LV, LU (secondary level qualifications), NL, PL and SI

²⁴ AT, BE-Wallonia, BG, CZ, DK, EE, ES, FR, DE, IE, LV, LU, LT, NO, NL²⁴ and UK (E&NI). Other courses: BE-Flanders, BE-Wallonia (adult education), EE (VET), ES (VET), CZ (in some schools only), DK, IE (in further education and training), LV, LT (VET), PT and NO (in post-secondary VET).

3.2.5 Transparent QA measures in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment

3.2.5.1 Main points

Less than half of the countries covered (15)²⁵ were reported to have a transparent QA measures in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment. These could be specific frameworks for validation or a framework for the education sector which also comprised validation. Thirteen additional countries²⁶ were reported to have a QA framework in place which did not meet one of the above conditions, and eight countries²⁷ were reported not to have a QA framework.

3.2.5.2 Additional information

As illustrated below in Table 3.6, arrangements for quality assurance (QA) in validation can either be devolved to the awarding body or institution; be covered by existing general QA systems in formal education and training or be specific to validation. In addition, quality codes or guidelines on validation are in place in some countries.

Table 3.6 Quality assurance arrangements for validation

Responsibility for QA in validation devolved to the awarding body or institution	HR, CZ (youth sector), DE, DK, FR, EE, EL, LU, LT (HE), NO, BE-Wallonia (HE)
QAF specific to validation in place in some sectors	BE-Wallonia (CVET), CZ (adult education), LI (HE) LT (HE, youth sector), NL (VET and HE), CH (VET)
Existing QA mechanisms in place encompass validation	AT, BE-Flanders, BG, CY, FI, HU, IE (further education, HE), IT, IS, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SE, SK, CH, UK (E&NI, Wales, Scotland)
Quality codes or guidelines on validation in place	DK, DE, FR, LU, IE, NL, NO, SE, UK (E&NI, Wales, Scotland)

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation. Note: EE, MT, PL, PT, RO have been assigned to a specific category based on the assessment of the report writers due to lack of available information. The categorisations used in this table have been developed by the research team

The sharing of QA procedures with formal education has the advantage that it facilitates permeability, coherence and recognition and is the favoured model in most countries. A specific QA system, on the other hand, enables greater customisation of procedures and greater recognition that identification and documentation phases are also important for validation

²⁵ LT (HE), LV, LI (adult, general), CZ (adult), BE-Wallonia, CY, FI, IE (FE, HE), IT, PL (adult), PT, UK-ENI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales, CH (Upper VET, professional education and training)

²⁶ AT, BE-Flanders, BG, DE, HU, IS, LU, NL, RO, SK, ES, SE, EE

²⁷ NO, SI, DK, EL, FR, HR, MT, TR

procedures and should be quality assured. An important point to make where QA in validation is devolved to individual providers is that there is a risk of considerable differentiation in QA across providers and sectors, a concern raised in the Norway report for example.

The use of quality principles, codes/charters, handbooks or guidelines supports individual providers in the implementation of QA procedures for validation is relatively widespread. These are based on the Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning²⁸ (Germany, on a project bases), the European Guidelines²⁹ (Luxembourg in secondary education) or work by national Ministries (Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the UK Wales and Scotland) or Agencies for lifelong learning (Norway).

3.2.6 Provision for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors

3.2.6.1 Main points

The development of professional competences of staff is an area that requires strong development in most countries. Only 7 countries³⁰ were reported to have requirements specified for the development of those competences for staff involved in validation. In two countries³¹ it was reported that the development of professional competences was not a requirement, but it was an individual right of those involved in validation. In 26 countries³² development was reported not to be a right or it was reported that there was no provision for it. In this area there has been little progress since 2010.

3.2.6.2 Additional information

The quality of the validation process and methods depends on those implementing it. The first important point to make is that the profile of validation professionals differs across countries, as no standard definition applies. However, 'de facto' many validation professionals share to some extent a common profile, as in most countries they are teachers or counsellors, and representatives from the productive sector (employers/experienced professionals). The requirements for validation professionals in terms of qualifications, experience and training vary³³.

²⁸ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-edefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory-principles.aspx>

²⁹ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-edefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-guidelines.aspx>

³⁰ ES, BE-Flanders, FI, LU, PL, TR, BE-Wallonia

³¹ EE, LV

³² CY, CH, CZ, DE, DK, FR, IS, LI, NO, UK-ENI, UK-Wales, AT, BG, EL, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, MT, RO, SE, UK-Scotland, NL, SI, SK (no information/not possible to assess: PT)

³³ In the Netherlands, the requirements can vary as according to the Quality Code for EVC, the 70 accredited EVC providers can choose their own methods to guarantee the level of competence of their EVC-professionals. There is no official certificate nor a standard or qualification for assessors to date. There are however some profiles with competences for assessors and professionals offering guidance, developed by the Kenniscentrum EVC. In Italy, these aspects are not yet defined at the national level, while in the regional validation systems there

- Mandatory requirements in terms of qualifications: MT (planned);
- Mandatory requirements in terms of training: BE-Flanders (labour market sector), BG, CH, CZ, CY, ES, EL, FI, IS, IT, PL, SK
- Mandatory requirements in terms of experience: BE (Flanders and Wallonia), BG, CY, CZ, FI, FR, IT, LU, LT, PL, PT, RO, ES, EL, SK, TR.

In Malta, it is planned that validation professionals will be required to hold a qualification in the specific area and a specifically-developed qualification (for assessors) at the MQF/EQF Level 4. Mandatory requirements in terms of training are also limited – they may apply to all individuals or to a minimum of members of the assessment panel in validation procedures, as is the case in Finland for VET. In the Czech Republic, validation professionals must undertake a specific preparation course for recognition of non-formal and informal learning and work with adults, but this is not required if they are teachers or adult educators.

Mandatory requirements in terms of experience are more common, whereby the validation professional must be able to demonstrate experience in the field. The requirement varies in terms of the type and level of experience across sectors and across countries. Ireland is a particular case in that since the 2001 Teaching Council Act teachers going into further education are required to have the capacity to undertake student needs and skills analysis, including the recognition of prior learning. In Sweden, national criteria and guidelines note that professionals involved in validation (guidance counsellors, advisor in public employment office or teachers) should meet a set of competence requirements. In Belgium-Wallonia a minimum threshold of five years of experience applies in order to carry out the VDC validation procedure.

In terms of the continuous development of the professional competences of staff involved in validation process across all relevant sectors, education and training opportunities to support the professional development of staff involved in validation can be observed in a number of countries. However, in few countries there is a requirement for staff involved in validation to undertake development activities or is development of professional competences an individual right.

are specific procedures already in place for recruitment and accreditation of practitioners on the basis of experience and training.

Examples of training provision and qualifications to support the professional development validation professionals

- In **Luxembourg**, training is systematically provided to guidance practitioners that support candidates and members of validation committees.
- In **Romania**, training for validation practitioners is provided by the validation centres but not on a regular basis.
- In **Slovakia**, assessors must have passed an examination for practicing as adult educators/trainers (lektor).
- In **Bulgaria**, specialised training courses have been developed for validation practitioners involved in the 'System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences' project.
- In the **UK-Scotland**, a few organisations in the public sector have introduced training for staff (and stakeholders), also making available resources materials and workshops opportunities.
- In **Norway**, county authorities provide training to assessors in primary and upper secondary education on an annual basis and inexperienced assessors are also given mentoring support.
- In **Estonia**, there have been many training opportunities in the HE sector due to extensive funding (ESF programme). Training courses are offered to assessors, councillors/advisers and applicants. During the period of 2008-2012, 973 people participated in RPL assessor training and 242 in RPL counsellor training.
- In **Iceland**, the ETSC training course for assessors was developed for the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) in 2008 and has since then offered training for project managers, assessors, and counsellors/advisers. It is a two-day course where the concept and practices are reviewed and discussed.
- In the **UK**, the Agored Cymru Level 3 Award in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is intended for practitioners working at any level in the education and training sector across the UK. The qualification, which is currently being introduced into the QCF, is made up of three units: the theory of RPL; formative RPL and summative RPL. It is hoped that the introduction of the qualification should lead to a greater degree of consistency in the application of RPL.
- In **Ireland**, an example of training provision is the Cork Institute of Technology and the Dublin Institute of Technology, which provide a range of training opportunities for training to staff who have responsibility for the development and management of any aspect of RPL. This includes an internal staff website; briefing sessions; workshops; consultations and a formal 5 ECTS credit training course at Masters level for policy and academic staff.
- In **Switzerland**, the Certificate and Diploma of Advanced Studies in Validation^f is organised by the Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (SFIVET), the academic Institution in charge of qualifying and certifying VET teachers and trainers. This modular qualification path includes a specific module aimed at specialising professionals in advising, assessing and managing the validation procedures. Every module delivers 5 ECTS.
- As noted above, in time, validation professionals in **Malta** will be required to hold a qualification in the specific area and a specifically-developed qualification (for assessors) at the MQF/EQF Level 4.
- In **Finland**, assessors must have the diploma of Specialist in Competence Based Qualifications; a 25 credit compulsory training programme.

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation.

3.2.7 Synergies between validation and credit systems

3.2.7.1 Main points

Twenty seven countries³⁴ (a marked increase compared to 2010) were reported to have developed links between validation and credit systems (for instance, the acquisition of credits towards a qualification is possible through validation) in all or some sectors. This suggests a good degree of progress in this respect in relation to 2010. A maximum threshold for the number of credits that can be obtained via validation is set in some countries and sectors, either centrally or by institutions. Five countries³⁵ were reported to be discussing such links, and four³⁶ were reported not to have a link under discussion.

3.2.7.2 Additional information

Credit systems are not yet in place or well established in all countries and sectors. For instance, ECVET is not yet in place in CY, CZ, ES, AT, BG, EE, LT and FI. In Norway, a national credit system was introduced in August 2013, so to date there is little practice as to the link between validation and credits. It should be noted that the possibility of using validation to shortening programmes and exemptions can still exist in countries where there is yet no formal credit system in place. This is the situation for instance Austria and the Czech Republic. In most of countries, the award of credits – as is also the case for modules, advanced standing or exemptions - through validation is regulated at the national level.

In the higher education sector, a link between validation and ECTS (compatible) credits already exists in about half of the countries reviewed. A maximum threshold for the number of credits that can be obtained via validation has been set in some countries (for example, up to 15 % of total ECTS credits points in Spain, up to one sixth in Liechtenstein and up to 30 % in Latvia), while there are little or no limitations in Finland or in Estonia (where the only limitation is that the final thesis or exam cannot be awarded through validation). In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the specification and guidance document for the qualification framework in HE (FHEQ) states that the institution may set limits to the proportion of credits that can be achieved through recognition of prior learning.

3.2.8 Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation

3.2.8.1 Main points

While there has been some progress since 2010 in this area, still in only a minority of countries (8)³⁷ disadvantaged groups are given priority in national/

³⁴ AT, BE-Flanders, BE-Wallonia, BG, HR, DK, EE, FI, FR, IE, IS,IT, LI, LV, LT, LU, MT, NO, NL, PT, ES, SE, UK-ENI, UK-Wales, UK-Scotland, CH, SI

³⁵ CZ, EL, HU, PL, RO

³⁶ DE, CY, SK, TK

³⁷ IT, RO, NO, DK, LV, BE-Wallonia, BE-Flanders, IS

regional strategies or policies in validation. In twelve countries³⁸ specific projects or initiatives were reported to have a particular focus on disadvantaged group, whereas in a further twelve countries³⁹ no specific targeting was reported.

3.2.8.2 *Additional information*

Validation can benefit disadvantaged groups in terms of increased self-esteem, motivation to look for employment or further education, confidence, qualifications enhancement and professional credibility. The degree to which existing validation provisions are explicitly targeted to specific target groups and contribute to support disadvantaged individuals varies across national contexts. However, due to the impact of the crisis, a shift from a 'mainstreamed' approach to a more targeted approach to the development of validation measures can be observed in some countries. According to the 2014 Inventory country reports, about two thirds of the countries covered have specific targeted validation measures in place for disadvantaged groups. In those countries where such initiatives are not in place, disadvantaged individuals may still be able to access general validation opportunities – in particular in those countries in which there is a 'right' to validation, such as Denmark or Norway.

With the rise of unemployment since the start of the economic crisis in 2008, the role of the PES, and of skills audit and career orientation actions for unemployed has continued to become particularly important.

For early school leavers and low qualified adults the measures taken are broadly similar. They include:

- the possibility to take final examination to access a formal programme of study (including higher education programmes) without having to take part in a formal education/ training programme prior to this,
- the provision of access to 'alternative' qualifications, such as vocational or professional qualifications which recognise on-the-job training, or
- the provision of access to formative validation by means of skills audits, the use of portfolios or other means that can help early school leavers to understand their competences or identify training programmes tailored to their needs.

These different types of validation suit various sub-groups of the diverse early school leavers and low qualified groups. For instance, for young people who left school early to take up an opportunity in the labour market, external examinations may present a cost-effective means of acquiring a formal qualification for the skills and competences they have acquired through work. For young people with more complex needs, formative approaches may present a more approachable method of formulating a pathway back into

³⁸ PL, SK, SI, NL, CH, DE, IE, SE, AT, BG, EE, UK-Scotland

³⁹ LI, LT, TR, CZ, EL, ES, FI, HU, LU, UK-ENI, FR, MT

education, training or work. The extent to which early school leavers are supported to undergo validation in the workplace for career progression is less clear. The reports suggest that countries are putting greater emphasis on validation for low qualified adults than younger early school leavers.

Validation initiatives targeting migrants can aim at a better formal recognition of the experience and qualifications they have acquired abroad (Germany, Austria) or focus on the provision of guidance (Finland). In Finland, the testing of language skills and mapping candidates' existing competencies support the identification of possible suitable placements within employment and/or education for migrants.

It should be noted that limited information is available on the take-up of validation opportunities by disadvantaged individuals. In Belgium-Flanders, since the launch of work experience certificates in 2006 and up to December 2012, 88 % of candidates belong to a disadvantaged group. Besson (2008), reports that in France the VAE system, in spite of the mention of the importance of disadvantaged individuals in the relevant laws, benefits primarily people in managerial and intermediate labour market positions. As such, many certifications resulting from VAE procedures are at the level of master, license and professional licence, in particular in the areas of economics, management and social, economic and administrative sciences (DEPP 2011).

One aspect to take into account is that often initiatives addressed at disadvantaged groups are based on project work, and aims to increase the employability of individuals in those groups. A common challenge is that such projects tend to emphasise their procedural efficiency and the achievement of certain targets rather than adopt a more comprehensive understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the skills of those in their target groups (see also Diedrich, 2013). Part of the lack of longer-term impact of project is the result of projects them being ephemeral and the relationships and actions that they build being not stable. Thus, the extent to which stable relationships between key stakeholders are created is a key element to take into account in project work with disadvantaged groups.

Another aspect to consider is how validation interacts with other education and welfare policies. In Hungary, the new Adult Education Act (2013) made the assessment of prior learning an obligation in vocational education and language training. However, there are still circumstances which make its application difficult, particularly in the light of state subsidised programmes. This is because eligible adults (mostly jobseekers) receive social assistance benefits based on their attendance to classes. If their prior learning is recognised and they are then exempted from attendance their benefit is reduced.

3.2.9 Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit'

3.2.9.1 Main points

Much progress is required in relation to the opportunity to undergo a complete 'skills audit' according to the country experts. In no country it was

reported that there is a right to undertake a skills audit within six months from becoming unemployed. In 17 countries⁴⁰ the opportunity to undergo such an audit exists, but only after 6 months, or the timeframe is not specified. In 19 countries⁴¹ it was reported that a skills audit system is not in place. No information was gathered in relation to this area in 2010.

3.2.9.2 *Additional information*

While in some countries the concept of skills audits is well developed and established (e.g. Bilan de compétences in France – see the French Inventory report), in others, skills audits are not defined as such but could be seen as part of the validation process. In the Czech Republic, skills audits can be offered by PES under the name ‘professional and competence diagnosis’ (or action plan). Practitioners had been provided with methodological support (inspired by the French Bilan de compétences) for more than a decade. However, in recent years, due to restructuring in local PES offices, this service is increasingly provided by external contractors to PES offices. Only limited numbers of staff trained remain employed by PES offices and hence it is unlikely to be provided internally in the future. In France, the Public Employment Services offers to registered jobseekers a service called ‘Evaluation of competences and professional skills’, which aims to map the skills of the person related to the main job sought, identify any transferable skills or training needs. This evaluation lasts from half a day to and includes interviews and practical simulation exercises⁴².

There are also countries where national measures for skills audits have not been reported, but career orientation/professional plan initiatives, mostly – but not always - carried out but the Public Employment Services (PES), take place. For instance, in Austria, there are no national measures for skills audits in place but there are several initiatives aimed at identifying and analysing an individual’s competences, aptitudes and motivations in order to (re-)define a career pathway. Such procedures are offered in adult learning institutions (particularly aimed at those who lack basic skills or did not graduate from a lower secondary school), and by the PES or by freelance guidance practitioners or coaches. In Iceland, skills audits have been provided at the accredited Lifelong Learning centres for low skilled unemployed adults, with the result of creating a portfolio of competences that can lead to validation or other types of career decisions.

Finally, there are examples of countries from which information on skills audit initiatives has not been reported. It is important to add that in some countries specific services are explicitly called ‘skills audit’ or a similar term whilst in other countries, services are essentially similar in nature but not called skills

⁴⁰ TR, CH, BE-Flanders, BE-Wallonia, NL, SE, SI, NO, LU, EL, HU, FI, IT, PL, FR, HR, LV

⁴¹ DK, CZ, MT, AT, DE, LI, PT, RO, EE, CY, ES, LT, SK, BG, UK-Scotland, UK-ENI, UK-Wales, IE, IS

⁴² <http://www.pole-emploi.fr/candidat/l-evaluation-des-competences-et-des-capacites-professionnelles-eccp--@/suarticle.jspz?id=4827>

audits. Therefore, the way in which countries define and interpret the concept of a 'skills audit' varies considerably.

Different approaches to skills audits have been identified in the country updates for the 2014 Inventory. In some countries individuals are responsible for their own assessment (in most cases through the completion of an online portfolio). In most cases, self-assessments are complemented with counselling and assessment provided by the Employment Services, education institutions or external accredited providers. Some individuals need the support of an adviser to help them to understand/identify their own skills and competences, and how to present/describe these. Although self-assessments can constitute a good documentation tool of self-reflection, in order for the documentation to be reliable, self-assessments do not seem enough if skills audit or validation is to be carried out. Thus, there are also countries where one-to-one audits are offered. These face to face consultations are offered by the professional counsellors of the PES, the skills auditors and in some cases by school professional counsellors and/or and the psychological and pedagogical guidance services of adult learning institutions/schools. Panel audits do not seem to be a common approach in Europe but are found in Liechtenstein or Switzerland, for instance, where a panel of experts is responsible for the assessment phase where the candidate's dossier is examined. Besides the assessment and consequent documentation provided by professional counsellors, in some countries other methods used are multiple choice tests or written assignments (e.g. Denmark). In some cases, self-audits and one-to-one audits are complemented with third parties evaluations, psychological and performance tests, as in the case of Switzerland.

The results of skills audit are usually a document/portfolio that states the competences, skills and aptitudes of the individual, in many cases including a "next steps" plan regarding training and sometimes recommending the involvement in the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning. This is not always a physical document, but an online tool. Regarding timing of the provision of skills audits for unemployed people, for most countries it has not been possible to identify a specific time frame. Skills audits seem to be voluntary in most European countries.

3.2.10 The use of EU transparency tools is promoted

3.2.10.1 Main points

The information provided by national experts suggests that greater efforts are needed in the promotion of EU transparency tools. Table 3.3 reports on the extent to which Europass and Youthpass are accepted by employers and educational institutions as tools to document non-formal and informal learning. Only in a minority of countries these tools are accepted to a high degree by both types of stakeholders⁴³. The number of countries in which

⁴³ CY, FI, EL, HU, MT, PL(HE), RO (Europass); FI, MT, RO (Youth pass)

acceptance was low for both tools⁴⁴ (urgent action needed) is significant. No information was gathered in relation to this area in 2010.

3.3 Access to validation

There are two main ways to look at the take-up of validation: level of take-up, and trends in take-up. Section 3.3.1 reviews, first, level of take-up of validation leading to the award of a formally recognised qualification or certificate or to access to a formal education course. It then looks at trends in the take-up of various types of validation. Finally, sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 discuss issues faced in the analysis of data on the take-up of validation, and data availability and systems for data collection.

3.3.1 Data on take-up of validation of non-formal and informal learning

3.3.1.1 Take-up levels

Table 3.7 presents data from the country reports on the number of users of validation using the most recent data available. Available evidence suggests that in some countries there are validation initiatives that exhibit high numbers of users, but this is far from being the case in the majority of countries reviewed. Below, we offer information on take-up. It should be noted that this information refers to absolute numbers of participants in validation initiatives for which data is available. It thus does not include validation initiatives for which information is not available – as mentioned, information on validation take-up at the national level is patchy, and does not take into account the size of the country.

In the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands, at least 10,000 candidates per year take part in one of the main summative⁴⁵ procedures to validate their non-formal and informal learning available in the country. The take-up of validation opportunities can also be considered as relatively developed in certain initiatives in Finland and Italy. It should be noted that the data presented refers sometimes to applications and in other occasions to awards. There can be substantial variations between the number of applications and awards. The Besson (2008) and other reports (DEPP 2011) on the French situation are amongst the few works that include a quantitative dimension on the outcomes of validation initiatives at the national level. Of the 60,000 candidates that can be expected per year in the French VAE system, only 26,000 degrees and diplomas were accredited (Besson 2008:10).

According to the data collected, the highest number of validation users recorded for validation procedures that can lead to the award of a qualification is in France, with at least 80,000 candidates per year applying to the two different types of validation procedures in place.

⁴⁴ BE-Flanders, BG, CZ, EE, DE, IS, LT, NO, NL, TK, SE, UK-Scotland, CH (Europass); AT, BE-Flanders, BG, CY, CZ, EE, DE, EL, IS, LT, NL, PL, TK, SE, UK-Scotland, SI, CH (Youth pass)

⁴⁵ Of course, this denomination does not imply that 'summative' validation does not have formative elements.

Table 3.7 Take-up of validation linked to the award of formally recognised qualifications and certificates or access to formal courses

Examples of countries	
■	AT: different forms of validation, including exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination in second-chance education: approx. 7.000 candidates in 2012.
■	BE-Wallonia: in 2012, approx. 2.800 candidates in VDC and over 1,000 candidates applying to access to higher education in universities and <i>Hautes Ecoles</i> .
■	BG: in 2011, approx. 1.200 certificates for professional qualification issued by centres for vocational training.
■	CZ: on average, 1.822 assessments were carried out per month in the period 2010-2013, with some important fluctuations (approx. 87,500 assessments for VNFIL carried out in the period 2010-2013).
■	CY: in 2013, 1.100 applications have been filed to obtain a certification of vocational qualification.
■	DE: approx. 34.700 candidates took an external examination to obtain a VET qualification in 2011; annual data on other types of types of validation of non-formal and informal learning not readily available.
■	ES: over 20.000 candidates for assessment and accreditation process of professional competences acquired through work experience in 2013 (important fluctuations on an annual basis).
■	FI: the system of Competence Based Qualifications (CBQs), which embeds validation of non-formal and informal learning as an integral part of the entire qualifications system, is very popular among the adult population; each year 100.000 people access the system – but not all of them can validate prior learning.
■	FR: in 2012, 64.000 candidates per year applying for VAE in order to obtain (part of a) qualification; about 15.000 candidates per year apply to access to higher education on the basis of prior experience.
■	NO: In the school year 2010-2011, approx. 2.500 adult learners in upper secondary education had their non-formal and informal learning assessed.
■	NL: the number of applications for validation through <i>Ervaringscertificaten</i> fluctuates between 15.000 and 20.000 every year (latest registered number: 17.700 in 2011). These certificates are used to assess and recognise the competences (both vocational and general) of a candidate in relation to sectoral standards (branch or sector qualification), MBO (VET qualification), HBO (HE qualification awarded by universities of applied sciences) and the Open University.
■	PT: in 2012, approx. 69.900 adults were certified in the RVCC academic process and 1.300 people were certified in the RVCC vocational process. <i>The validation system is currently under reform; there were no applicants in 2013.</i>
■	TR: in 2013, approx. 7.100 people received certification for previous vocational qualifications.

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation

3.3.1.2 Trends in the take-up of validation leading to qualifications, certification or access to formal education courses

In terms of trends in the take-up of validation, the 2014 country reports show encouraging developments (see Table 3.8). Indeed, the majority of countries reports where country experts estimated a trend in take-up based on available data, noted an increase in the number of validation users in 2014 compared to 2010. While the scale of such increases cannot be precisely

measured due to the lack of specific data, this is a positive trend in the use of validation.

When reviewing trends, a distinction should be noted between mature and emerging validation systems. According to the information collected by country researchers, the take-up of validation leading to qualifications has stayed the same in five of the reviewed countries, including France and the Netherlands, which both have a relatively advanced system of validation of non-formal and informal learning. While progress is being made in most countries, there is significant room for further dissemination of and information about validation practices across Europe, including in countries with relatively high numbers of users. There is also room for increasing take-up in many other countries, as the figures presented above in Table 3.7 suggest.

Table 3.8 Trends in number of applications for validation initiatives

Increased	Stayed the same
BE-Wallonia, BG, CH, CY, CZ, EE, EL, ES, FI, IS, IT (some regions), LU, LV, RO, SK, TR	DK, FR, LI, NL, SI
NO, BE-Flanders, DE	No country
Contrasting trends across sectors/ types of validation	Decreased

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation. Note: Not possible to assess or data not available for the following countries: AT, HR, HU, IE, LT, MT, PL, PT, SE, UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales). The PT system was in transition at the time of writing.

3.3.1.3 Take-up of validation not directly related to formal qualifications

The picture regarding the take-up of validation changes significantly once validation practices not leading to a qualification, certificate or access to a formal education programme are taken into account. Validation usage then becomes much more widespread.

As the 'Current approaches to skills audits in the public sector' thematic report suggests, Public Employment Services (PES) are active users of skills audits for the purposes of identification and documentation of competences, for career orientation purposes and in order to facilitate labour market integration. They can be supported by other organisations, such as adult education providers or specialist private companies. One model is to use a model similar to the '*Bilan de competences*' (see the French Inventory country report for further details); but jobseekers in a very large majority of European countries can benefit from other models of skills audits. For instance, in Greece, unemployed people can consult the Greek PES to develop an action plan (of potential training and job applications available) based on their competence and previous training, as well as their motivations. There is no certification linked to this action plan. The target group for such initiatives is high and in some countries individuals have an entitlement to the audit, thus and although data on the take-up of these

initiatives is hard to come by, it is likely to be significant, given the active involvement of PES – either directly or through outsourcing.

In many countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Finland, Switzerland), besides targeting jobseekers and the unemployed, the employment services target other disadvantaged groups; especially the low qualified and people at risk of unemployment, but also women and immigrants. For instance, in Norway, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service and the county education authorities have specific agreements to assist low skilled individuals in order to increase job opportunities and eventually complete training.

Individuals and institutions also record their competences, including those non-formally and informally acquired in portfolios and CVs. In Italy, the *'Libretto formativo del cittadino'* -similar to a Europass portfolio and European Skills passport although not self-managed but issued by an institution - which is used to record individuals' learning histories and competences, acquired both in formal and non-formal learning settings was issued to 25,000 individuals in the period 2011/12.

3.3.1.4 Take-up of validation by enterprises

The take-up of validation by enterprises is practically universal, as companies assess competences (including those acquired not formally and informally) in their recruitment processes, and for the management of their human resources. A recent Cedefop's survey of enterprises showed that around 40% of companies in their sample reported to have very extensive/systematic competence assessment systems for recruitment, 25% did for personnel development and around 20% for career progress and succession planning (Cedefop 2014). Fewer than 25% reported not to have assessments at all or hardly extensive/ systematic in relation to these points. Such assessments were employed mainly for professional competences, but also for digital, language and mathematic competences, and for personal and social competences, that are more likely to have been acquired at least partly through non-formal and informal education.

3.3.2 Assessment of data availability on the take-up of validation

Measuring the take-up of validation is a complex task. Validation is a process, not just an act. As already mentioned, it is based on four stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. Data on validation has often been considered only in relation to validation 'acts' of assessment linked to formal qualifications leading to certification in the form of a credential/ qualification. In this respect, data are illustrative, but still scarce. Data on other stages of validation (identification, documentation) is even more challenging to collect.

3.3.3 Data collection systems

Validation can occur in the formal education sector, the labour market and the voluntary sector. In some cases, it may be about the identification of skills through certain tools that an individual uses, without much external engagement – processes that could only be captured through individual

surveys or interviews. Even when referring to validation in the context of the achievement of formal qualifications, data collection is often not performed. For instance countries may collect data on the number of candidates taking a final examination in order to achieve a given qualification, but not distinguish between the candidates who have and who have not followed a formal training course to prepare for that qualification. Obtaining data on the users of validation of non-formal and informal learning is thus notably challenging. This sub-section reviews who is involved in gathering data on the take-up of validation.

The country reports reveal that data on the number of validation candidates and/or on the outcomes of validation is not always systematically collected or centralised at the national level, and could be enhanced. Various organisations – including education providers- are involved in collecting data, as summarised in Table 3.9 below.

Table 3.9 Types of organisations collecting data on the number of validation applications or outcomes

Type of organisation	Country
National government/authority	AT, BG (except HE), CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, LI, LU, LV, MT, NO, PL, RO, SI, SK, TR
Regions	DE, BE, ES, IT (some), LV, NO, RO
Productive sectors/Chambers of Trades and Crafts	BE-Flanders, HR, LV, MT
Education providers	All/most: BE-Flanders, BE-Wallonia, CH, DK, EE, FI, FR, LV, MT, NL, SI, TR Some: AT, CY, DE, IE, IS, NO, SE, UK (England, Northern Ireland, Wales)

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation. Note: Unknown or no data collection in HU, LT, PT, UK (Scotland)

While many organisations are involved in recording data on the take-up of validation – providers, chambers of commerce, regions, these data are rarely aggregated at national level. Furthermore, the coexistence of different types of validation practices – as mentioned above-, makes data collection difficult on an aggregate basis. Much remains to be done in terms of establishing comprehensive data collection systems that can reliably reflect the take-up of validation initiatives. None of the countries reviewed as part of the Inventory publishes data on the proportion of qualifications issued using validation of non-formal or informal learning out of all qualifications issued. This paucity of data limits opportunities for evaluation and monitoring of validation activities, a concern already voiced in the 2010 Inventory.

Available data, as presented above in this report, is suggestive of the importance of the take-up of ‘summative’ validation (comprising assessment aimed at the recognition of non-formal and informal learning through a qualification, a part-qualification or access to a formal education programme)

in some countries and education sectors, but not all. The take-up of validation is more widespread when we could call 'formative validation' (often related to processes of identification, documentation and personal or social recognition that lead to reflection on one's own skills and competences with the aim of better understanding and furthering their learning or career pathways) in the labour market and for certain groups, such as unemployed people.

4 Conclusions and challenges

Based on the data collected by the Inventory, it is possible to identify countries that are progressing in the enhancement of their validation systems. This is, for example, the case of Austria, that is taking solid steps towards the development of a comprehensive national strategy for validation, or Portugal, that has experienced in recent times significant increases in the take-up of validation at low qualification levels and is currently working towards the setting up of a more comprehensive system. Belgium-Flanders has also experienced significant progress in a number of fronts. It also continues to be one of the countries where disadvantaged groups are targeted to a greater extent. Nordic countries and Switzerland have been striving particularly in the improvement of the linkages of validation with the productive sector and are amongst the top performing countries in this area. Some countries with less established systems, such as Malta, have also made progress. Other systems, like the French or UK systems, can be considered 'mature' systems where less development has taken place in the period under review. Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Slovakia and Turkey are amongst the countries where low performance was reported in a greater number of arrangements.

Similarly, in certain areas significant progress has been made, in particular regarding 'architectural' aspects: strategy, legal frameworks, embedding validation in qualification systems and linking it to NQFs, establishing synergies with credit systems in those countries where those are in place, and stakeholder involvement. There has also been progress, although to a more moderate degree, in terms of take-up.

It is also possible to identify continuing challenges for European validation systems. On the ground, progress has often been slower than in policy terms. In the future, the translation of policy into practice and tangible results needs to be closely monitored, in particular given that in most countries there are systematic and socio/economic barriers in place to resist major growth. Areas where improvement has been experienced and challenging areas are outlined in turn below.

4.1 Areas where improvement has been experienced

4.1.1 Strategy

Since the 2010 Inventory was undertaken, advances have been made in the introduction of national validation policies or strategies to support validation policy and practice. Having a strategy does not necessarily mean that it is enacted. However, having a comprehensive national strategy can help to direct efforts and enhance clarity for users and accountability regarding progress. It shows a political will for validation and gives this visibility, which is an important message to providers and other stakeholders.

4.1.2 Legal frameworks

The majority of European countries have multiple legal frameworks covering validation. This shows that validation is penetrating different education sectors. Only three countries have a single legal framework. Some countries which currently have multiple frameworks are now working towards the production of a more comprehensive framework offering an integrated approach towards recognition of acquired competences in all sectors. Systems without validation laws may be more agile in reacting to changes, in particular compared to countries with multiple frameworks. Multiple frameworks can also make processes more difficult to understand for the general public, and may make it more difficult to adopt.

Yet having a legal framework has some clear advantages for users. One is the legal security regarding entitlements and responsibility that a law should offer to those to whom it concerns. Second, is the certainty that laws should provide – for instance regarding procedures, appeals, proportion of credits that could be claimed through validation.

4.1.3 Stakeholder involvement

The level of engagement of stakeholders and degree of coordination differs across countries, but is generally increasing. The majority of countries reviewed reports clear allocation of responsibilities with regard to validation.

4.1.4 Embedding validation in qualification systems: links to formal qualifications and national qualifications frameworks

Links to formal qualifications are also increasing, which enhances recognition in the labour market and education systems. This is accompanied by sharing of qualifications acquired through formal and non-formal learning and also the use of similar assessment methods. This, however, raises issues regarding the specific needs of some target groups of validation, or regarding the nature of some of the competences that individuals may want to validate and which may not necessarily be linked to a formal qualification.

In additional, all countries reviewed reported that a link between validation and the NQF is under discussion or already established – at least partially or in some qualifications. The strength of the link, however, varies from systems where all qualifications are required to offer routes for validation to be included in the NQF, to much looser links.

4.1.5 Take-up of validation

To the extent that available data permits to see, there has been a moderate increase in the take-up of validation linked to formal qualifications. However, the scale of such increase cannot be systematically measured due to data limitations. There is also evidence of high use of validation in companies and for unemployed people (through skills audits). Gaps in data collection systems at national level, however, significantly hamper evidence base regarding access to validation, as already mentioned in this report.

A particular target for validation according to the Council Recommendation is 'disadvantaged groups'. With the rise of unemployment since the start of the economic crisis in 2008, the role of the PES, and of skills audit and career orientation actions for unemployed has continued to become particularly important.

4.2 Continuing challenges

4.2.1 Access, awareness and recognition

In most countries there is also limited evidence on the level of awareness of the potential value of a validation system especially amongst the general public. While targeted campaigns are important awareness is greater when awareness-raising measures are embedded with qualification structures, as these attract large numbers of users like do PES.

It is evident that some countries need to work in the provision of access to validation generally and skills audits in particular. There are also continuing challenges in ensuring that disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation arrangements. Regarding recognition, it is important to ensure that the results of validation are recognised by education systems, the labour market and society. The 2012 Council Recommendation states that validation arrangements should enable individuals to acquire full or part qualifications and that the standards should be the same or equivalent to those of formal qualifications. The Inventory has documented how in some countries validation candidates obtain the same qualifications as participants in formal education and training programmes, in some cases after taking the same assessment and in some cases after taking an assessment that is specific for those undergoing validation. Yet in other countries the types of qualifications awarded to validation users differ from those awarded by education and training authorities. This may result in a perception of 'type A' and 'type B' qualifications, even when standards may be shared, or reflect the fact that standards are not shared.

4.2.2 Fragmentation

Few countries have comprehensive validation systems in place. Most systems are collections of initiatives, projects and procedures. An aspect of this is that the frequent reliance of validation on project-based work has positive aspects in order to reduce entry-costs and stimulate innovation. However, it also creates challenges regarding scalability, and the possibility to adopt long-terms and holistic views of validation. Embedding these in project-based work is a challenge for the future.

More generally, there continues to be a lack of coordination between stakeholders and across sectors, resulting in a fragmented approach to validation in many instances, although improvements in the area of coordination have been noted.

4.2.3 Financial sustainability

Some countries continue to report that the cost and corresponding level of bureaucracy involved in validation is a significant barrier, but there is generally little evidence of reflection on the financial sustainability of validation. In this respect it is interesting to note little discussion in the country reports about funding mechanisms to make validation sustainable. Validation may create significant 'non-traditional' work in exchange for not much or no additional income, in an era in which universities and other providers are encouraged to become financially self-sufficient.

4.2.4 Coherence

Whilst procedures for recognition can be simple, they are also likely to be diverse and bringing varied practice into a single system is a challenge, especially in terms of QA. In this context, the coordination of diversity into a single model that is recognisable by the general public is a major challenge, and is related to the challenge. The Inventory has documented a need for greater consistency in the use of validation methodologies. Moreover, the methods less often used in the labour market are those closer to assessments/ exams used in the education system. Whether this is because both systems complement each other in this way or whether this is a sign of mismatch in the focus and interests of both sectors when it comes down to assessment is an area that deserved further exploration in the future.

It should be noted that this has implications for quality assurance, one of the key principles for validation. Most countries' quality assurance systems for validation are shared with formal education. This has the advantage that it facilitates permeability, coherence and recognition in relation to formal education, and the award of formal qualifications as a result of validation. The main drawback is that a specific QA system enables greater customisation of procedures to the specificities of validation systems, and greater recognition that identification and documentation phases are also important for validation procedures and should be quality assured. This is important because, as mentioned, the methods for assessment used in validation are in practice more varied than those used in formal education.

4.2.5 Professionalisation of staff

A major challenge identified in the Inventory refers to the qualifications and competences of staff involved in validation, in particular assessors. Mandatory requirements in terms of experience are more common, but there few countries have established requirements regarding training and none requiring specific qualifications. 'Assessor' qualifications would not only be relevant for validation practitioners, but also for those in formal education.

That provision is made for the development of professional competences for staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors continues to be a significant challenge, as noted in section 3.2.6.

4.2.6 Data collection

As noted earlier in this report, gaps in data collection systems at national level hamper evidence base regarding access to validation significantly and this should be a priority aspect for the future. There is thus no systematic feedback loop to show the education and labour market outcomes of validation. There is, then, little way of showing a learning institution that providing an alternative route to access and progression is positive in a cost-benefit analysis.

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Annex 1 Indicators used to construct Table 3.3

Note: It should be mentioned that in the table there are three indicators based on an ambitious interpretation of the spirit of the Council Recommendation. First, Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) on the benefits, opportunities and procedures of validation is measured here with reference to the level of awareness of validation amongst guidance practitioners in education – this is due to their key role in advising individuals about validation. Levels of awareness amongst the general population, on the other hand, are much lower according to Inventory data. Second, the Recommendation requires that “provision is made for the development of professional competences of guidance practitioners”. This has been translated, in a demanding way, as a requirement for validation staff to undertake professional development. Third, the Recommendation asks that EU Transparency tools are promoted in order to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes. Here, rather than focus on promotion – which is done in all countries in the implementation of European programmes, although indeed with varying degrees of success - we focused – again in a demanding way - in the acceptance of these transparency tools by employers and educational institutions.

1. Is validation linked to the national qualifications framework/ European qualifications framework?

High: Learning acquired through non-formal and informal means can be used to acquire a qualification on the NQF and / or can be used to access formal education covered in the NQF

Medium: A link between non-formal and informal learning and the NQF is under discussion

Low: There are no discussions on the establishment of this link

2. What is the general level of awareness on validation amongst the guidance practitioners in education?

High: Most

Medium: Some

Low: Few/ none

3. Do the validation arrangements generally include provision of information, advice and guidance to candidates?

High: Yes, for all aspects of validation this is publicly available and financed

Medium: Yes, for certain aspects of validation this is publicly available and financed

Low: No publicly financed provision of information and guidance

4. What targeted measures are in place?

High: Disadvantaged groups are given priority in national/ regional strategies or policies on validation

Medium: There are individual projects/ initiative targeting disadvantaged groups

Low: No specific targeting

5. Is there a right for unemployed people to undertake a skills audit?

High: Yes, within 6 months

Medium: Yes, but after more than 6 months or timeframe not specified

Low: No system implemented

6. Is there a quality assurance framework in place?

High: Yes, specific for validation (in line with other frameworks) or a framework for the sector which encompasses validation and effectively supports reliable, valid and credible assessment

Medium: Yes, there is a specific framework or a framework for the sector which encompasses validation but does not meet all conditions above

Low: No

7. Are there provisions in place for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in validation?

High: Yes, it is a requirement

Medium: Yes, it is an individual right

Low: Yes, but it is not an individual right or there is no provision

8. How is validation linked to formal qualifications?

High: Award of full and partial qualifications of the same or equivalent standard as qualifications obtained through formal education, at least in some sectors

Medium: Award of full or partial qualifications of the same or equivalent standard as qualifications obtained through formal education, at least in some sectors

Low: No award of full or partial qualifications of the same or equivalent standard as qualifications obtained through formal education in any sectors

9. To what extent are Europass and YouthPass accepted by employers and educational institutions in your country as tools to document non-formal and informal learning?

High: High for both tools

Medium: Other combinations

Low: Low for both tools

10. Is validation linked to national credit systems?

High: Links exist in all or some sectors

Medium: A link is under discussion

Low: There is no system or link