Country report

Norway

2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1 Introduction and evaluation

1.1 Abstract

There are laws and regulations in place relating to validation of non-formal and informal learning for each level of education and training in Norway. There is also a link with the labour market through the career guidance centres in the counties, which provide career guidance to adults and support the provision of validation. The Norwegian arrangements are based on shared principles across all sectors. One of these principles is that the validation process should be voluntary and of benefit to the individual. Nevertheless, while participation in validation is voluntary, the legal framework guarantees the rights of individuals to undertake a validation process.

The Norwegian system has been in place for some time now and is well-recognised and understood by stakeholders and learners. However, one area for further work is to find ways of validating the ‘soft’ skills and competences acquired through non-formal adult learning in the third sector, to recognise learners’ achievements in this sphere in a similar way to the validation offered in relation to formal curricula.

1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

Since the 2014 update to the European Inventory on Validation, there have been no major changes in the system. The main initiatives in the period relate to the validation of skills for refugees and immigrants, as outlined in more detail in the country report.

The developments relating to validation in Norwegian education and training have involved national seminars and conferences to disseminate guidelines developed in 2013/14. Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, has arranged regional seminars on validation of prior learning towards exemption in Higher Education. The Directorate for Education and Training has arranged national conferences on validation of prior learning for lower and upper secondary education, including VET.

Validation of prior learning is one of several themes included in an ongoing process of setting up a national strategy for competence policies. This strategy may result in increased attention towards validation of prior learning as an important element in the competence development of adults.

Validation of prior learning, known in Norwegian as ‘realkompetansevurdering’, is clearly defined in the education sector, where it is used as a specific term in laws, regulations and guidelines. In the validation system of the education sector in Norway, prior learning includes formal, non-formal and informal learning, even though formal learning is not a subject of assessment in the actual assessment phase. In Norway, formal learning is viewed as a part of a person’s total competences and therefore included in the term prior learning.

Validation is developed from a national perspective as it is regulated by national laws in the education sectors. National regulations and guidelines set up general frames for local provision of validation in the counties or in the higher education institutions. The responsibility for the local provision in primary, lower and upper secondary education is decentralised to county education administrations. Other national regulations and guidelines apply to post-secondary VET colleges and institutions in higher education where each learning institution has more autonomy in defining validation procedures.

The Norwegian validation system is established in the formal education sector. Hence, the reference for validation of learning from the workplace or third sector are the learning outcomes decided in national and/or institutional curricula in the formal education sector. As validation is regulated by law, it is a visible part of national strategies and arrangements.

Vox has the overall national responsibility for following up cross-sectoral challenges linked to validation of prior learning. It brings forward suggestions of actions to the Ministry of Education and Research and sets up relevant projects in response to these.
The Directorate for Education and Training has the national responsibility for validation of prior learning in lower and upper secondary education and training for adults. The directorate follows up laws and regulations in this field and supervises the provision in the counties.

Outcomes of validation of prior learning in Norway are formally recognised as equal to other formal documentation of learning since certification from validation is issued from the same institutions as formal certificates acquired through formal learning.

In post-secondary VET and higher education, each institution provides the validation procedures based on the learning outcomes of the relevant study programme. Each institution is autonomous and there are hence no general procedures for validation of competence at NQF/EQF levels 5 and above.

At a national level, although data is collected by the Directorate for Education and Training, there is currently no overview of how validation procedures are practised when validation of prior learning is provided at the level of upper secondary education.

Due to high numbers of refugees arriving in Norway in 2015, the 2016 budget of the Ministry of Education and Research has allocated extra funding for various measures aimed at enabling refugees to use their qualifications to integrate into working life as quickly as possible. This includes both mapping the skills and qualifications of refugees and other recent immigrants, and validation. In addition, possible ways of quick assessment of qualifications are being explored by the quality assurance agency, NOKUT.

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is possible in all levels of education and training in Norway and can be used to acquire modules and/or full qualifications. There are laws and regulations in place relating to each level of education and training (see the 2010 update for a comprehensive overview of the laws and strategies which have been introduced over time), providing a general framework for validation of prior learning.

Validation was introduced as part of overarching lifelong learning policies. These were launched in earnest through the 1998 White Paper on the Competence Reform ("St.meld. nr. 42 (1997–98) Kompetansereformen") and were again underlined in the 2009 White Paper Education Strategy ("St.meld. nr. 44 (2008–2009) Utdanningslinja"). As mentioned in the introduction, recognition of prior learning, i.e. validation legislation and regulations, are exclusive to formal education and training.

The development of validation frameworks for primary and secondary education and training was determined by the pace of introducing statutory rights for adults to complete upper secondary education and training (by the autumn of 2000) and likewise for primary education in 2002. The statutory right to attend and complete education at these levels entails a right for the students to access validation for free. In addition, since 2001, adults without sufficient formal qualifications can have their prior learning assessed in order to gain admission to higher education. At the same time, the higher education institutions were authorised to give exemption from parts of study programmes on the basis of assessment of prior learning. At the post-secondary vocational colleges, validation for admission purposes was introduced with the original law for this level in 2003. On the other hand, the possibility to give exemption from parts of programmes on the basis of validation was introduced at this level only in 2013.

The Norwegian system of validation is based on shared principles across all sectors. One of these principles is that the validation process should be voluntary and of benefit to the individual (http://www.vox.no/no/global-meny/English/Accreditation/). Nevertheless, while participation in validation is voluntary, the legal framework guarantees the rights of individuals to undertake a validation process.
Differences in funding and governance mechanisms found in primary, upper secondary, post-secondary vocational and higher education affect the preconditions for setting up validation procedures. The sectors of education have therefore developed schemes for validation of non-formal and informal learning according to their specific needs and preconditions. Higher education institutions exercise the greatest freedom in the design and delivery of validation, because responsibilities are devolved to each institution. This also concerns post-secondary VET. Nevertheless, the national government and its underlying administrations provide guidelines for all educational sectors.

Whereas validation affects a person’s educational as well as labour market status, the coordination between public services comes to the fore. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) is responsible for information and guidance in their labour market institutions - i.e. municipal employment centres, but they are dependent on input from the education sector in matters of validation. Hence, NAV might pay for the validation of a jobseeker’s non-formal and informal learning, yet the actual assessment of those learning must be carried out by an educational institution.

A report on the status of validation published by the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning (Vox) in 2011, identified a need to improve cooperation and involvement in different sectors at county level, and between different levels of education. Quality assurance (QA) was also identified as important; both in terms of methods and with regard to the training of assessors.

During the autumn of 2013, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, in cooperation with stakeholders from the sectors, developed national guidelines relating to adults who claim the right to have their formal, non-formal and informal learning validated compared to lower or upper secondary level. The guidelines focus mainly on how to interpret the regulations relating to validation and how to implement the different points described in the regulations. The purpose of the national guidelines for validation is to ensure that sound validation procedures are carried out, leading to similar practices in all Norwegian counties and municipalities. By providing a national basis for local practice, the guidelines could spur confidence and legitimacy of the validation practices. The special focus in the guidelines, also on practise linked to documentation of the results of the validation process, may further support the legal rights of adults who apply for validation of their learning.

Vox has also developed guidelines for validation regarding admission to post-secondary vocational education and training and regarding exemption in higher education. These guidelines have been developed in cooperation with stakeholders from the sectors. They are disseminated via Vox’s website and by e-mail. It is hoped that the introduction of the guidelines may lead to greater use of validation at these levels in the future.

In the third sector and the labour market, one ongoing challenge is to disseminate the available validation arrangements, while making sure that stakeholders find them useful and provide feedback to public validation services. In this way, validation procedures can sustain current skills strategies.

2.2 Validation in education and training

As stated above, validation of non-formal and informal learning is offered in all levels of education and training in Norway. There are laws and regulations in place relating to each level of education and training (see the 2010 update for a comprehensive overview of the laws and strategies which have been introduced over time), providing a general framework for validation of prior learning.

In terms of the four stages of validation, the Norwegian process for validation outlined below can - with small adaptations - be applied to any level of education and training:

1. information and guidance;
2. identification and documentation;
3. assessment; and,
4. certification.

With regard to the final ‘certification’ stage, a range of different outcomes are possible, depending on the level and the result of the validation process. The certificates from the validation proves equal to the qualifications awarded to students who undertake formal learning, except that for validation candidates, no grade is given, the document simply states ‘approved’ or ‘pass’.

In lower and upper secondary education, the outcome can either be a document showing that the individual has achieved a full qualification (certificate); or, if the individual has not achieved a full qualification, a document is awarded called a ‘certificate of competence’. In VET programmes, it is not possible to obtain a full qualification based on validation of prior learning alone. Applicants must pass the final trade examination (http://www.udir.no/Stottemeny/Om-direktoratet/Ordbok/) to obtain the final VET (trade or journeyman's) certificate.

In post-secondary vocational education and training, to date, validation has mainly been used to support admissions, meaning that the validation process does not necessarily result in a formal document or certificate, rather the award of a study place (documented for example in a letter). As mentioned earlier, the possibility to validate for the purpose of exemption for part of study programmes was only introduced in 2013 for these colleges.

Finally, in higher education, a student who achieves some courses through validation, and others via formal learning, will not receive a grade for the validated courses (only Pass), whereas most other courses passed will be graded by the letters A to E. For validation students who wish to continue their studies, the lack of grades in certain courses might be a disadvantage when competing for a place at a master's level.

The extent to which each of the four stages is used in practice will depend on the needs of the individual concerned and the purpose of the validation application. How the four stages play out and are being adapted in practice, can be illustrated by the 2013 guidelines relating to adults who claim the right to have their non-formal and informal competencies validated at lower or upper secondary level:

1. Information and guidance
   This stage starts when the applicant contacts the county or municipal administration. Through guidance, it becomes clear whether the purpose of the validation is to be enrolled in lower or upper secondary education and training, or undergo validation in order to prove competence (knowledge and skills) in individual subjects at the lower/upper secondary level. In the first case, there is a need to clarify which type and level of qualification the applicant aims to achieve by the end of the course (‘sluttkompetanse’). The standards/reference for the validation are based on the formal curricula for lower/upper secondary education and training. This first stage also displays the breadth of the applicant’s informal, non-formal and formal learning.

2. Identification and documentation.
   The municipality or the county administration works together with the applicant to provide documentation of the prior learning endowed by the applicant. It is then decided if the collected documentation needs to be supplemented by charting more of the competencies held by the applicant, as well as which methods for charting that should be used.

3. Assessment
   Professionals in the municipality or in the county assess whether the applicant’s competencies are equivalent to the learning outcomes in the formal curriculum. In case

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1 The terms used in National guidelines for lower and upper secondary education are: 1) Guidance and clarification; 2) Mapping; 3) Assessment and valuation; and, 4) Certification.
the learning outcomes and the level of the applicant’s competencies are equivalent to
the requirements of the national curriculum of lower or upper secondary education and
training, the relevant subject for assessment is approved.

4. Certification

At the final stage, the municipality or the county administration documents the results of
the validation through a formal decision (‘enkeltvedtak’). If the applicant’s competencies
are assessed as equivalent, a documentation of competencies is produced and given to
the applicant with minimum delay. As mentioned above, this document can either be a
full qualification (a certificate), equivalent to those earned through formal learning (but
without grades) or a certificate of competence for those who have not completed the
education programme and can only demonstrate the competences for certain subjects
within the programme. As already mentioned, validation applicants for the VET
programmes need to pass the final (trade) examination.

In Norway, it is not known to what extent courses from Open Educational Resources, such
as MOOCs, are used as subjects for validation, since only numbers of validations at national
level and collected and not information on the content that has been validated.

In higher education, if the providers of OERs, including MOOCs, are higher education
institutions and the courses are part of the providing institution's own degree programmes,
the assessment would be considered as recognition of formal qualifications, not as
validation. In principle, there is no difference between OERs/MOOCs and other provision,
flexible or not, as long as it is clear whether the course is (part of) a formal programme and
designed in a way that allows verifiable identification of both course provider and course
participants and hence the qualification of those certified.

This view is also voiced in a green paper on MOOCs submitted to the Minister of Education
and Research in June 2014 (NOU 2014:5).

2.3 Validation and the labour market

Vox is organising a project to raise awareness of competence development amongst social
partner representatives within the workplace by trying to create a role similar to the union
learning representative (ULR - http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/about-unionlearn/union-learning-
reps) in the UK. The project involves funding and supporting (voluntary) regional training
courses for union representatives to become facilitators for learning. Public funding is
earmarked for this purpose and is administered by Vox.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) and the county education authorities
have concluded agreements to ensure targeted cooperation both on a county level
(planning) and for practical collaboration on a local level; addressing low skilled individuals in
need of assistance from both sectors to increase job opportunities and, if needed, complete
training.

The Career guidance centres in the counties (established in 16 of 19 counties) provide
career guidance to adults and support the provision of validation. The career guidance
centres cooperate closely with education administration and NAV in the counties.

Vox has coordinated a national project involving five counties trying out an alternative
method for work-based vocational training of unskilled workers in the youth and healthcare
services. Validation of prior learning was included in the procedures (http://www.vox.no/statistikk-og-analyse/publikasjoner/fagbrav-pa-jobb/).

Examples of internal validation procedures, linked to wage negotiations or competence
development in companies, can also be found outside of the formal system of validation. In
these instances, the validation standards/references are based on local requirements
defined by the company concerned. For example, the Municipality of Halden uses an
electronic ‘inventory’ tool for employees to record their learning and achievements – both
formal and non-formal learning. The information recorded in the tool can be used to support wage negotiations during the employee evaluation process. Employees who provide evidence of participation in full-time formal learning are entitled to a wage increase of NOK 24,000, while those who provide evidence of non-formal learning are entitled to a wage increase of NOK 6,000. (Correspondence with Toril Bjerkei, Municipality of Halden, 2016)

2.3.1 Skills audits

In Norway, there is not a specific national-level skills audit tool similar to the French ‘bilan de competences’. However, all clients supported by NAV are entitled to a mapping and clarification of their prior formal education and training, work and health to ensure that the assistance they are then given to prepare for entering the labour market is optimal. When relevant, a ‘Work ability’ assessment is performed to clarify the need for more comprehensive support. This is followed by further individual follow-up when implementing the schemes stated in the action plan (Directorate of Labour and Welfare, 2013). Tools which are used to support this process include the self-registration system on www.nav.no.

Although the needs assessment process does not lead to any formal ‘certificates’, it may be an important contribution towards the preparation of a relevant and targeted activity plan for the client. The plan may include both ‘self-help’ activities, formal validation of prior learning and work delivered from the mandated centre, more comprehensive career guidance from the career centres, health assessments, labour market measures, health treatment, ordinary education, etc.

In addition, NAV is expected to assist jobseekers when applying for a new job by, for example, providing advice on how to document prior learning in CVs and in other forms of documentation. NAV is also obliged to assist in defining ‘adapted qualification trajectories’ for each jobseeker. Thus, employment centres in the Norwegian municipalities provide a sort of formative validation to jobseekers, to enable them to identify and document their skills and thereby support their search for employment.

Working alongside NAV, there are now career guidance centres in 16 of the 19 counties of Norway. These centres make use of a variety of methods and tools to support the career dialogues with their users. Vox has developed a tool ‘Profiles for basic skills at work’, which has been introduced to schools, career centres, NAV and others. This tool is increasingly used in dialogue with users.

2.4 Validation and the third sector

The ‘Personal Competence Document’ (PKD), developed by VOFO, which was described in detail in the 2010 update for Norway, is still available. It is a self-declaration document for the presentation or ‘mapping’ of an individual’s learning (formal, non-formal and informal), including learning through voluntary work. The PKD is free to use and available on the internet (http://www2.vofo.no/pkd/). It has not been developed further or updated since it was first introduced in 2010. Also because it has not been actively promoted or disseminated, the take-up of the tool remains low. (Interview with representative of VOFO, 2016).

VOFO believes that more should be done to ensure that adult learning taking place outside of the formal sector can be recognised through validation. Although there is legislation in place recognising non-formal and informal learning, there is more work to be done to ensure that this learning can be recognised. The reference for validation is the learning outcomes set in national and/or institutional curricula. This means that outcomes of non-formal learning – not included in the formal curricula – cannot be recognised through this validation process. There is a will to recognise other outcomes, but since they are measured against national curriculums from formal learning, there is at the same time a lack of tools to recognise them, a lack of trained assessors in this field and a lack of documentation of non-formal learning on a par with the way formal learning is expressed and documented.
Therefore, in VOFO's opinion, new tools should be developed to facilitate validation of learning outcomes outside the formal education system and to enable the benefits – in particular the ‘soft’ outcomes – of adult learning to be documented. Furthermore, VOFO holds that guidance practitioners and assessors involved in delivering validation in the formal sector should have a better understanding of adult learning and the outcomes that it can bring about. VOFO therefore suggests more partnership-working between the non-formal and formal education sectors. VOFO also recommends that more research is carried out, either at national or at Nordic level, to gain a better understanding of the benefits of non-formal and informal learning. (Interview with representative of VOFO, 2016).

Students who attend courses at Norwegian folk high schools (Folkehøgskolene), which are considered part of the third sector, can earn ‘competition points’ in recognition of the learning they have undertaken for some of the courses offered. These points can be used to support applications for further learning, for example university studies. The points are not graded but give details of the subject studied and the content covered. (Information provided by Øyvind Krabberød, Folkehøgskolekontoret, 2016).

NVL, the Nordic Network for Adult Learning, has produced a report in 2015 discussing key competences in the voluntary sector and how they can be validated (http://nvl.org/Content/Folkbildning-key-competences-and-validation). This report contains suggestions of relevance for validation in the third sector of Norway.

3 Links to national qualification systems

3.1 Qualifications Frameworks

The Norwegian National Qualifications Framework (Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring, NKR) was laid down by the Ministry of Education and Research in December 2011 after widespread consultations. The implementation was expected by 2014. (It should be noted that as the level descriptors for higher education were laid down through a qualifications framework for higher education in 2009, the implementation deadline was at the end of 2012 for those levels of education.) The NKR covers primary, lower secondary, both general and vocational upper secondary, post-secondary and higher education qualifications. It comprises eight levels however no qualifications are included on the first level. The three highest levels of the NKR are identical to the three cycles of the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area: Bachelor, Master and PhD.

In autumn 2013, a committee was nominated to look into the possibility of including non-formal learning provision in the National Qualifications Framework. The committee report was finalised in 2015 and described two models for possible further development of the NKR in Norway.²

The aim of the NKR is to describe the formal national qualifications system in a transparent way. In doing so, it is intended to increase mobility, support more flexible learning pathways and promote lifelong learning. One of the objectives of the NKR is to offer the opportunity to develop new instruments for valuing learning acquired outside the formal system. Five areas in which the framework will influence validation are outlined in the NKR:

1. introduction of learning outcomes as the underpinning principle for all qualifications;
2. increased transparency of qualification levels;
3. development of more fit-for-purpose methods, supporting validation;
4. more consistent conceptual basis; and,

² A presentation in English of these models is found at page 17 in "How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe. Norway – country report". See: www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vndil-in-europe
5. general shift of attention towards learning outcomes³.

The levels of the NKR are described using level descriptors that lay down the knowledge (kunnskap), skills (ferdigheter) and competences (generell kompetanse) expected from all successful school leavers and graduates at each level. There is one common set of descriptors for each level which covers all qualifications, except at the upper secondary level, where there are two parallel sets of descriptors of equal value (one for vocational and one for academic programmes). The Norwegian education and training system is now fully based on the principle of learning outcomes.

3.2 Outcomes of validation

It is possible to acquire a full qualification on the basis of validation in the Programme for General Studies in upper secondary education (university-preparatory). In upper secondary VET, it is necessary to take the relevant final (trade) examination to achieve a trade or journeyman’s certificate as a skilled worker.

In HE, individuals can gain exemptions for parts of study programmes. On the diploma as well as on the Diploma Supplement, the relevant courses and credits will be identified as having been obtained through validation. In post-secondary VET, the possibility to give exemption from courses and modules on the basis of validation was introduced through regulations of 1 August 2013 and there are as yet no systematic reports on experiences from these kind of procedures.

In terms of awarding credits or partial qualifications after validation in primary and upper secondary education and training, the Education Act permits candidates to achieve a partial certificate qualification, called ‘certificate of competence’ (kompetansebevis) at any level through validation. Candidates then have the right to access further education and training, in order to achieve a full trade or journeyman’s certificate.

The certificate of competence is awarded to recognise that an individual has achieved certain objectives (learning outcomes) within an upper secondary curriculum. The certificates can serve as a stand-alone evidence of competences and can be used, for example, to support a job application or participation in further education courses. These partial certificates of competence are recognised on the labour market, as a documentation of parts of the demands in the trade. An example is a certificate for cooking breakfasts, as a partial competence for a fully trained cook.

It is also possible to access education through validation – the individual must be able to show (through documentation or other means) that s/he has the required skills and competences to enter a certain level of education and training.

4 Standards

In Norwegian education and training, the term ‘reference’ is more commonly used than ‘standard’. The reference used for validation of prior learning in the education system in Norway is the learning outcomes set in the formal curricula; the same as those used in formal education and training. At the lower and upper secondary levels, the national curricula are used as reference, whereas in post-secondary and higher education, each institution’s learning outcomes in the relevant study programme are used as reference. This means that while there is some standardisation in the way that validation candidates are assessed at the lower and upper secondary levels, there is variation at the levels of post-secondary and higher education. At the post-secondary and higher levels, credits are also used.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation

³ Ibid.
arrangements and its coordination

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (http://www.udir.no/Stottemeny/English/) – an agency under the Ministry of Education and Research – bears the overall national responsibility for supervision of primary and secondary education and training, including documentation and validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes. There is no directorate for post-secondary VET and higher education, which hence fall under the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research. However, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT - http://www.nokut.no/en/) is responsible for control of quality assurance systems and for recognition and accreditation of programmes and institutions.

Vox (http://www.vox.no) – an agency under the Ministry of Education and Research – works to promote participation in community and working life by improving the competence level of adults. Vox develops, analyses and disseminates knowledge about adult learning, including non-formal and informal learning. It has responsibility to maintain an overview at national level of the Norwegian approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

During the work carried out by Vox to prepare two sets of guidelines relating to validation in the Higher Education (HE) and post-secondary VET sectors published in 2013, working groups were set up for each sector. The working group for post-secondary VET brought together representatives from some learning providers and from the national council of post-secondary vocational education and training (which includes sectoral and social partner representatives). The HE working group was appointed by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR).

The responsibility for all aspects of delivery of validation in relation to lower and upper secondary level education lies respectively with the municipalities and the counties. In relation to post-secondary VET and higher education responsibility lies with the individual vocational college or Higher Education Institution (HEI). The national guidelines refer to the four stages of validation outlined above (see Section 2.2), but the actual assessment methods used are decided by the individual provider. Information about validation is generally provided via the internet or, in the case of the counties, in local newspapers or other local channels of information. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) is responsible for information and guidance in their labour market institutions – i.e. municipal employment centres – but NAV is dependent on input from the education sector in relation to educational matters (including validation).

Data collection relating to validation is undertaken by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (lower and upper secondary education). For post-secondary VET and higher education, data collection is made by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, NSD, in the DBH and the ‘DBH-Fagskole’ (DBH-F) databases, and by the admission service to higher education, "Samordna opptak", part of a government agency called FSAT. Information on validation is included in the annual “Education Mirror” (http://www.udir.no/Tilstand/Utdanningsspeilet/Education-Mirror/The-Education-Mirror-2012/) of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and the Vox Statistics Bank.

Education and training providers

All regional education authorities have set up one or more assessment centres for validation of prior learning in upper secondary education, which often are located at upper secondary schools. The centres provide information, guidance and help with the validation process in relation to upper secondary education. The centres also collect data on the candidates who have undergone validation, which is incorporated into a national-level register. The regional education authorities are responsible for quality assurance of the assessment procedure, including the training of assessors. For validation in lower secondary education it is the municipalities that have these tasks. There are approximately 250 adult education centres adults can contact if they want to go through a validation process.
The guidelines for validation in relation to admission to post-secondary VET build on a report charting how vocational colleges actually practise rules for admission (Vox, 2012b). The report shows that in 2011, more than half (35 of 61) of the vocational colleges answering a specific survey had carried out assessments of non-formal and informal competencies in relation to admissions. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT, has overall responsibility for the quality of provision in post-secondary VET.

The Ministry of Education and Research since 2011 publishes annual reports on post-secondary VET, based on the DBH-F database mentioned above. Data on admission based on validation are part of that report (http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Fagskoleutd/Fagskoler_F-4395_Hele.pdf).

As explained in the 2010 Inventory, HEI set up their own procedures for validation, based on their own curricula for their study programmes. Each HEI is responsible for the quality of its validation services. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT has overall responsibility for the quality of provision in HE (Hawley and Ure, 2010)

**Private sector actors (including social partners)**

In terms of learning that takes place in the private sector, the Norwegian system of validation is intended to provide a link between work-based learning and the formal education sector. Validation can increase awareness of both the importance of work-based learning and the opportunities offered by the formal education and training sector to capture such learning. Moreover, validation enables experienced workers who do not have formal educational qualifications to complete their formal vocational education and training in an efficient way (Consultation on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL), Contribution from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, 2011).

**Third sector organisations**

The Norwegian Association for Adult Learning (VOFO), which represents 14 study associations and their members, has always been involved and consulted in the development of the validation system in Norway. Nevertheless, as noted previously, according to VOFO there is still more work to be done to ensure that adult learning which takes place outside of the formal sector can be recognised through validation. (Interviews with representative of VOFO, 2013 and 2016).

**Coordination between stakeholders**

As mentioned previously, the Directorate for Education and Training bears the overall national responsibility for supervision of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education and training, including VET, for adults. This includes validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level of education. In this context, the Directorate works together and is in regular contact with the Ministry. The Directorate also has regular relations with the:

a) County Governors – a government agency in the counties responsible for a number of supervision and management duties, functioning as the connection between the state and the municipalities;

b) County education authorities – the largest service currently provided by the county authorities is the operation and development of upper secondary education and training;

c) Other stakeholders – Social partners, Vox, VOFO and NAV.

Vox and the Ministry of Education and Research are in regular contact in different areas of responsibility held by Vox. Vox will provide policy notes to the Ministry on challenges which might need to be addressed.

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4 Since 2012, The Ministry of Education and Research publish an annual report on post-secondary VET.
In terms of other stakeholders, Vox would normally set up a reference group to support specific projects relating to validation (e.g. reference groups were set up to support the development of the aforementioned guidelines), but there is not a permanent reference group in place. The Vox website provides a range of information on validation which is of use for stakeholders.

As noted above, NAV and the county education authorities have county agreements to ensure targeted cooperation both on a county level (planning) and practical collaboration on a local level. These agreements should enable those involved to address low-skilled workers/unemployed in need of assistance to increase their job opportunities and, eventually, complete training.
6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

Various stakeholders have responsibility for promoting the opportunities, rights and benefits of validation at both local and national level. Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, is active in this area, along with the Ministry of Education and Research, The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service.

For lower secondary and upper secondary education and training, it is respectively the responsibility of the municipalities or the county authorities to provide information on validation opportunities to the public. The methods used vary across the different counties but are generally websites, brochures/leaflets and occasionally advertisements in newspapers. Likewise, it is the post-secondary VET colleges and the higher education institutions that are responsible for information about validation opportunities in relation to their provision. Higher education institutions also tend to provide information via their websites.

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

For upper secondary education and training, staff at the regional assessment centres provide adults wishing to access validation with information on guidance and other advisory support (Nilsen Mohn, 2007). In lower secondary education the adult education centres are responsible for advice and guidance. This is mainly delivered on a one-to-one basis, although group sessions may be held at the start of the process. Information is always provided before an individual commences a validation process, in order to support them to choose the right curriculum to be used as reference for validation. Depending on the resources available at the assessment centre, guidance may also be provided during the validation process, for example on how to document competence, how to collect documentation from earlier employment, etc. Information and guidance is generally provided at the end of the process, to enable the candidate to identify any further education or training needs. For those centres with fewer resources available, guidance may be provided by telephone or internet to cut down on costs.

For validation in relation to admission to post-secondary VET colleges and HE Institutions, it is the staff in charge of enrolment which is involved in the provision of guidance to validation candidates. The provision of guidance may depend on the type of institution and number of applicants (for example, a large institution with many applicants may provide more information via the internet, while a small institution with fewer applicants is likely to provide more direct forms of guidance to candidates).

One maxim of the enrolment staff in HE is to transmit realistic expectations to the validation applicants, while orientating them towards the reality that will meet them when admitted to a study programme. Interviews conducted for case studies on recruitment practices in Norwegian higher education suggest that staff in charge of admissions are not in favour of very liberal criteria for admitting candidates with prior learning. For example, studies have shown that candidates admitted to higher education with a minimum knowledge of Norwegian tend to lag behind throughout their entire study period (Stensen and Ure, 2010) Admission staff tend to claim that university studies require certain skills in digesting theoretical knowledge. Specific support to students admitted on the basis of non-formal learning is only given when asked for. Moreover, university administrations consider themselves not sufficiently resourced to do this for all such candidates. It was observed in

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5 http://www.observal-net.eu/node/60
one institution that the first semester serves as a kind of litmus test for these students. Once this barrier is passed, the remaining students do well (Stensen and Ure, 2010).

Validation in relation to applications for exemption for parts of study programmes requires thorough information and guidance from the institutions so that the student is able to decide whether it is relevant to apply for exemption and how to present the necessary documentation to support this application.

Most HEIs (in some cases the relevant student welfare organisation) have career centres serving their own students. Most post-secondary VET colleges are small and do not provide career guidance. As mentioned above, 16 of 19 counties have career guidance centres. These centres reach out to a broad part of the adult population. In addition, NAV also plays an important role in informing individuals about the opportunities available to them in terms of validating their learning (Consultation on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL), Contribution from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, 2011).

6.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

During the process of preparing the validation guidelines for HE and post-secondary vocational education, Vox held seminars for administrative staff and practitioners involved in delivering validation.

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The profile of validation practitioners varies, depending on the context in which the validation is delivered.

- Assessors at regional validation assessment centres/local adult education centres tend to have a background in the relevant education or trade. They may be teachers of the relevant trade, or people working as skilled workers in the trade, who have a high level of knowledge of the learning outcomes in the curricula that are being used as reference for assessment. There are no national qualification requirements for assessors and at county level, these requirements vary. It is generally recommended that they have a good knowledge of the content of the study programme to be assessed.

- The assessment of applications for a trade or journeyman’s (vocational) certificate on the basis of validation is carried out by the county vocational training board, on behalf of the County Education Authority. There are different vocational training boards for the different trades and each is made up of labour market representatives, including the social partners.

- In HE, each institution is responsible for setting up validation arrangements. Applicants for admission based on validation of prior learning may be assessed by a committee or by single members of administrative or professional staff. Applications for exemption from courses may likewise be assessed by juries composed of academic and administrative staff, or by single staff members with insight in the chosen subject. No formal requirements are set up specifically for validation practitioners in HE.

- There are no national-level requirements for the practitioners who deliver guidance in relation to validation in upper secondary education and these vary depending on the county. Validation guidance practitioners may be careers counsellors or teachers, for example.

- In HE Institutions, the profile of staff in charge of guidance to validation candidates varies from one institution to another. For applications for admission, it may be experienced administrative staff who provide the advice and guidance. In the case of exemptions, the
situation may differ – currently it is not common practice in the HE sector to award exemptions on the basis of validation and, therefore, it is not possible to suggest what might be common practice. Normally however exemption from courses would not be granted without any involvement of academic staff.

7.2 Qualification requirements

There are no centralised requirements for qualifications, other than that practitioners should be well qualified for performing the task of validation towards the learning outcomes in the curricula. It is the responsibility of each municipality/county (lower and upper secondary education)/each institution (post-secondary VET and HE) to make sure that the staff are qualified in their handling of issues related to validation.

The National guidelines for validation point out the need for career guidance and counselling during the process of validation and recommend which competencies the practitioners should have in the different phases of the validation process.

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

As noted above, it is the responsibility of the county authority/municipality to provide training for validation staff. In primary, lower and upper secondary education courses, seminars for assessors are delivered annually and inexperienced assessors are also given mentoring support. Once they have received their training, assessors are registered on a list at the regional assessment centre (Christensen, H, 2009)

The guidelines on validation that have been developed for HE and for post-secondary VET, respectively, provide practical information on how to deliver validation.

The guidelines on validation in relation to lower and upper secondary education are published online and copies are sent out to the counties and municipalities. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training has held national conferences to provide information, including measures for raising the competence both for administrative staff and validation practitioners.

There is no formal information on training provided in the HE sector but it is likely that institutions offer some form of training to their staff providing validation, for example informal training from colleagues.

8 Quality assurance

Validation in Norway is closely linked to the formal education system and will undergo the same quality assurance procedures as implemented in each education sector.

With regard to validation relating to lower and upper secondary education and training, the municipalities and, respectively, the counties are responsible for quality. The standards (reference for validation) are given by the learning outcomes in national curricula. For example, the counties can decide on the requirements they set out for validation practitioners. The guidelines developed in 2013 will also help to encourage a more standardised quality in the counties.

In HE, it is up to the individual institution to ensure the quality of their validation services. Responsibility for external quality assurance in HE is held by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). However, institutional practice in validation is not explicitly included in the quality assurance processes used to evaluate higher education institutions and/or programmes (National Report regarding the Bologna Process Implementation, 2009-2012, Norway).

As mentioned above, Vox has developed two sets of guidelines to support the HE and post-secondary VET sectors in the delivery of validation opportunities:
The first set of guidelines relates to post-secondary VET and covers validation of prior learning to support the admissions process; 

The second set of guidelines relates to HEIs and covers the use of validation to grant exemptions.

Also, as mentioned above, it is thought that the guidelines will help to encourage a more standardised quality.

The municipalities and the counties are subject to regular state inspections, which should take account of the validation delivered by the municipality/county, as well as formal education. Similarly, NOKUT conducts controls of post-secondary vocational colleges and HE institutions.

There is not currently a specific evaluation framework for validation.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

There are no earmarked funds for validation. Funding for validation procedures in the formal education system are given through block grants or other types of general funding established for education institutions. It is thus not possible to provide estimates of how much is spent on validation in Norway.

In lower and upper secondary education, the cost of validation is funded by the educational budgets in the different counties as long as the candidates have the right to education and validation. The funding allocated to validation therefore varies across the different counties, since they have the autonomy to manage their own budgets. No information is collected at national level on the costs associated with validation. In both post-secondary VET and higher education, funding is made by the institutions.

9.2 Distribution of costs

No information was identified during the research on costs for organisations.

Recognition of informal and non-formal learning related to lower and upper secondary education is free for the following groups:

- People with a right to complete their education from primary school to upper secondary school (costs are borne by county councils);
- People who are unable to work due to disability (costs are borne by the Labour and Welfare Service); and,
- People having signed a ‘jobseekers’ agreement with the Labour and Welfare Service can under some circumstances have their prior learning experiences assessed for free. One precondition is that the employment office considers the assessment to be necessary for getting the jobseekers back to work.

For those individuals who do have to pay, the price of a validation procedure varies depending on the course it relates to (for instance, the cost may be higher for vocational trades, because of the need to conduct practical tests).

In both post-secondary VET and HE, validation is free for the user (i.e. student and applicant); funding for validation (both for admissions and exemptions) is held at the level of the institution. However, HE institutions are allocated funding on the basis of the study points achieved by the individual learners. This means that if learners are granted an exemption on the basis of validation, the institution may receive less funding for that particular learner. However, recently announced changes in the financing system for HEIs might alleviate this
somewhat, as from 2017 the number of graduates will also be taken into account for the calculation of grants.

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

No explicit research project has been conducted in Norway into the benefits to individuals of undergoing a validation procedure.

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

There appears to have been a drop in the number of applicants for validation relating to upper secondary education, in comparison to when it was first introduced. There are many reasons for this, but the main reason is that there was a ‘surge’ of applications when validation was first introduced, especially in the healthcare sectors. Now that this backlog of applications has been processed, there is a more steady number of applications each year.

In the school year 2014/15, 2 800 adult learners taking part in upper secondary education and training had their prior learning assessed. This represents a minor increase in comparison to the school year 2013/14, when 2 600 adult learners participating in upper secondary education and training had their prior learning assessed. Most of those who get their prior learning assessed are participants in VET-programmes.

The share of students enrolled at post-secondary vocational colleges, on the basis of validation of non-formal and informal learning has remained at a stable 8 or 9 % each year in the period 2012 to 2015.  

According to the Vox Mirror 2014, the number of validation applicants in higher education has decreased by 4 % from 2012 to 2013.  

A national survey conducted by Vox in 2011 showed that in the HE sector, 182 adults applied for an exemption at bachelor level on the basis of validation during the academic year 2010/2011. Over 90 % (170 applications) were accepted, showing that most of the validation applications matched the requirements of the respective study programme. At master's level, it is reported that 49 exemptions were granted (the total number of validation applications at this level is not known). On the basis of these figures, a recent report produced by Vox concluded that exemptions based on validation are rarely used in Norwegian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This conclusion is based on a number of factors:

- The total number of exemptions were granted by a small number of institutions and most of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) exemptions identified for the Vox survey were reported by HEIs providing education to vocational teachers;
- There is a lack of awareness amongst staff at the institutions of the possibility of using RPL as the basis for exemption;
- Information for students on RPL is sparse, and there is low demand for this service;
- HE institutions believe that RPL processes are resource-intensive; and,

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http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Fagskoleutd/Fagskoler_F-4395_Hele.pdf
8 https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/tilstandsrapport-for-fagskolene-2014/id2428574/ (The numbers for 2015 are as yet unpublished.)
9 http://www.vox.no/nyheter/stor-okning-i-antall-realkompetansesoker1/
There are insufficient guidelines and criteria on the RPL process for administrative and professional staff working in HEIs.

The Vox report identifies two major questions for the future, which are ‘how to document prior learning’ and ‘how to prove equality and relevance between practical experience and theoretical knowledge’ (Vox, Recognition of Prior Learning used as the basis for exemption in Higher Education (Summary)).

9.4.2 Validation users

No further breakdown on the characteristics of users is available.

Two studies, one from 2005 and one from 2009, describe students admitted to HEI based on VPL and how they cope with their studies. Both studies find that VPL students may struggle during the first months/year due to lack of academic training, but have normal or better study progress after the starting difficulties are overcome.

9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups

Linked to increased immigration of refugees, there will be some actions to meet the need for competence mapping and development directed to refugees and other immigrants. These actions are in the planning phase at the time of writing.

Looking at initiatives focused on specific (disadvantaged) target groups, a three-year national project was carried out between 2007 and 2010 to pilot the use of validation for prisoners (Alfsen, Hanssen, Ramstad, 2010) (described in detail in the 2010 country update for Norway and a case study devoted to this specific project). The County Governor of Hordaland has responsibility for prison education in Norway including validation. While the original pilot only covered five counties, validation is now available in all prisons in Norway. However, the extent to which validation is offered varies across each prison. Also, the number of prisoners participating in validation processes has fallen after the pilot project ended – from around 200 in 2010 to around 81 in 2012 and 47 in 2014 (this does not show the full activity, since 247 candidates were considered for validation in 2014, but did not carry out a full validation process).

10 Validation methods

There is no standardised procedure for validation imposed on the providers at local level. As mentioned above, there is an overall four-stage process which can be applied to any level of education and training. These four stages are:

1. information and guidance;
2. identification and documentation;
3. assessment; and,
4. certification.

The method of assessment used varies, but it is a basic principle that the candidates should be able to document their competence without going through traditional tests/exams. However, as mentioned in chapter 2.2, in VET programmes it is not possible to obtain a full qualification based on validation of prior learning alone. Applicants have to pass the final trade examination\(^\text{10}\) to obtain the final VET (trade or journeyman's) certificate.

At lower and upper secondary levels, the new guidelines on validation underline that providers should use the methods that are relevant for the individual case. This means that some learners/candidates may need to undergo a smaller test; others might be required to provide documentation, while yet others may participate in a dialogue to describe their

\(^{10}\) [http://www.udir.no/Stottemeny/Om-direktoratet/Ordbok/]

competences. What is required is that the methods used are adequate to visualise the learning of the individual relevant for the particular validation standards/reference. It is also important to note that some individuals may require more guidance or dialogue to help them identify, describe and prove their own competence/learning. Thus, the method used should be tailored to the individual.

A commonly used method of assessment is the portfolio. However, the new guidelines for validation in upper secondary education state that a portfolio alone is not enough as an assessment – written documents should be combined with an additional form of assessment such as a dialogue, because written documents may not describe well enough what the person can do with what they know. This is particularly the case for learners wishing to use validation towards an upper secondary level qualification - many are not aware of their own competences or are not able to express them. The guidelines therefore aim to inspire the counties to use a combination of methods, as well as the portfolio.

At lower and upper secondary level (including VET), validation involves the assessment of the individual’s competence in relation to the learning outcomes in the national curriculum. As noted in the 2010 update of the inventory, the portfolio and dialogue-based assessment methods are common and vocational testing is also used for certain subjects and VET programmes. For individuals who have been granted an upper secondary certificate on the basis of validation, the certificate is not graded. Instead the certificate will simply state ‘approved’.

In post-secondary VET and Higher Education, assessments related to admissions will vary between institutions and, in particular, between programmes and fields of study. A case study of validation for professional studies in a university college found that self-declarations and statements from employers were the main instruments and tools used to identify relevance or equivalence. There was less evidence of the use of the portfolio method. At some HE institutions, the candidate may be asked to participate in an interview in order to provide further details (Ure, O-B, 2011).

11 References

11.1 References

2014 and 2016 Sources:


Christensen, H, Norway, in Singh, M. and Duvekot, R. (eds), Benchmarking national learning cultures on linking recognition practices to qualifications frameworks, Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, Germany

Consultation on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL), Contribution from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, 2011.

Directorate of Labour and Welfare, Peer PES Paper for Peer Review “PES approaches to low-skilled adults and young people: work first or train first?”, held in Lithuania, June 2013.

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Nilsen Mohn, T. (Vox), Valuation and validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway – experience and challenges 2007

Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, The Education Mirror 2012

NOU 2014:5 MOOCs for Norway – New digital learning methods in higher education, see https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/nou-2014-5/id762916/?q=MOOC&ch=1#match_0


### 11.2 Sources

#### 2014 sources:

- Vox
- The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training
- VOFO
- Folkehøgskolekontoret
- Additional information provided by representatives of the Community of Halden and Directorate of Labour and Welfare.

#### 2016 sources:
- Ministry of Education and Research
- Municipality of Halden
- NAV
- The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet)
- Ministry of Education and Research
- Folk High Schools
- VOFO
Country report Norway
2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This country report is one of 36 that, together with a synthesis report and thematic reports, constitute the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. It is a reference point for information on validation in Europe. It is organised around the principles defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation that were further elaborated in the European guidelines for validation. This is its sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016).