



Summary

When competences become occupational opportunities

How informal and non-formal learning can be recognised and used in Europe

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Opportunities and challenges for recognising and validating informal learning: summary of a cross-country comparison

Many European states are debating how occupationally relevant knowledge, skills and competences can be recorded better and made visible. Some EU countries have made considerable progress in the identification and recognition of competences acquired via informal and non-formal means. They have established validation systems which accord such competences a value on the labour market. In other EU states, formal education is still virtually the only route which opens up access to the education system and to the labour market. Competences which people obtain informally in their job or leisure time or in continuing training not leading to certification are frequently given little value, although in many cases they may be more significant for employability skills than formally certified knowledge. That leads to the question of whether the formal education systems really provide and assess what is actually needed for occupation and can contribute to close the existing skills gap? Taking into account current labour market figures – there are roughly 2 million unfilled job vacancies and more than 22 million unemployed EU-wide – the validation of non-formal and informal learning will be more and more essential to the European labour market.

Many people are capable of more than is visible in certificates

People without formal general or vocational education and training qualifications, but with many years of occupational experience, and people with professional and occupational competences acquired abroad may be particular beneficiaries of validation of informal learning. Persons with low levels of formal qualification have usually acquired their occupational knowhow in an informal fashion. They are especially dependent on making use of learning opportunities which they receive, so to say, “en passant” and outside educational and training institutions. These may occur during work activities, via exchanges with colleagues and in their free time. It should be emphasised that “persons with low levels of formal qualification” does not mean that such persons are not in possession of any occupationally relevant qualifications or competences. The opposite is frequently the case. Someone who has dropped out of higher education but has been configuring IT systems for a decade, a Syrian engineer who cannot present any documentation having fled his homeland and a widow with years of experience of providing care within the family environment are all professionally competent despite having little in the way of formal qualifications. This is where the crux of the matter lies in a society that is geared towards certification. Educational certificates are not merely instruments which express occupational competences. They also overshadow competences for which there is no certificate.

In earlier times when technological development was more sedate, there may largely have been a close correlation between certificates and competences. Learning took place and was certified within the education system before being applied for a lifetime. Knowledge work and rapid innovation cycles have, however, rendered this sequential model of occupational learning obsolete in many regards. More and more professional competences are being acquired continuously, on an in-service basis and in a self-directed manner rather than having been obtained prior to embarking upon a career. This applies to simple and complex tasks alike. The acquisition of occupa-

tional knowledge, skills and competences is self-made and no longer predominantly the domain of traditional educational institutions. Unfortunately, this does not apply to their certification. This remains closely tied in with educational institutions which display little readiness to recognise learning outside the courses they offer.

Recognising competences and making them usable via a good validation system

In many European countries, there is an absence of opportunities for the utilisation of competences that are not evidenced in the form of qualifications and certificates. Such competences are often used in the current workplace, but are usually not documented let alone certified. The few procedures available, such as the EUROPASS, do not yet form a generally recognised standard in application processes in the employment system. It is also the case that procedures for the documentation and certification of occupational competences or certificates acquired by non-formal means are often eclipsed by formal qualifications. The former are usually only used in a supplementary way. The formal education system creates hurdles, not only for persons with low levels of formal qualification, because it seldom recognises competences acquired via informal and non-formal means and does not link such competences with perspectives for higher-level formal training.

In the light of demographic decline and rising requirements in the world of work at the same time, this means that there is a societal problem as well as an individual problem. Many young adults are not in possession of a vocational qualification. Validation procedures would tap into a huge area of competence potential and could also reduce unemployment amongst workers with low levels of formal qualification. The education system and the labour market must also be increasingly opened up for those with atypical, highly different educational or occupational histories, such as persons with foreign qualifications or persons who are in possession of a vocational qualification but in practice have pursued quite another work activity.

Against this background in 2012, the Council of the European Union recommended that member states should create opportunities for the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning by the year 2018.

Validation systems work. How can we learn from one another in Europe?

In some European countries, there are already procedures in place which lead to certificates that can be utilised on the labour market and to access qualifications within the education system. The study “Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Germany”, which was conducted within the scope of a Bertelsmann Stiftung project entitled “Continuing training for all”, looked at good practice in Europe. The focus was on five core elements which affect central issues and aspects of a validation system. These will initially be briefly outlined here.



Legal foundations: an investigation was undertaken into the nature of the legal basis of the validation of informal learning and in which area it applies so as to render the results of validation procedures binding and utilisable. In France, for example, there is a comprehensive right for validation of competences acquired over a period of work activity of at least three years. This validation leads to official certification which is the equivalent of initial training in legal terms.



Procedures and instruments: efficient procedures delivering meaningful results are required. This secures acceptance and increases demand. In Denmark, for example, a two-stage certification procedure has been established. Individually demonstrated competences are recorded on a certificate and compared with defined learning outcomes from educational and training courses with the support of a vocational education and training centre for adults. In the next stage, this certificate can be used for personal planning of further training or for entry to the labour market.



Financing: validation costs money. For this reason, the creation of financing structures and a response to the question of who pays what amount of costs for the validation or qualification procedure are of crucial significance. In Europe, state-funded, company-based, private sector and various mixed forms of financing are all in place. In countries where there is a tradition of provision of educational and training provision on a free-of-charge basis, this has frequently exerted a positive effect on validation. In such cases, there is then a right to receive financing which is predominantly publicly provided. In Finland, the Ministries of Education and Labour share the costs of validation supplemented by a small contribution for fixed costs, which may be higher if candidates are in receipt of an income. Relevant mixed forms based on means testing could offer a starting point as an alternative to full public financing. In the Netherlands and France, companies participate in the financing of the validation by releasing their staff.



Institutionalisation: firm institutionalisation is an essential prerequisite for general acceptance of certification of competences acquired by non-formal or informal means. Clarification needs to take place as to which stakeholders are involved in which role and in which area of responsibility and as to the way in which they are networked. In Switzerland, the validation of education and training is a cooperative task carried out by the branch representatives/professional associations, the Federal Government and the cantons.



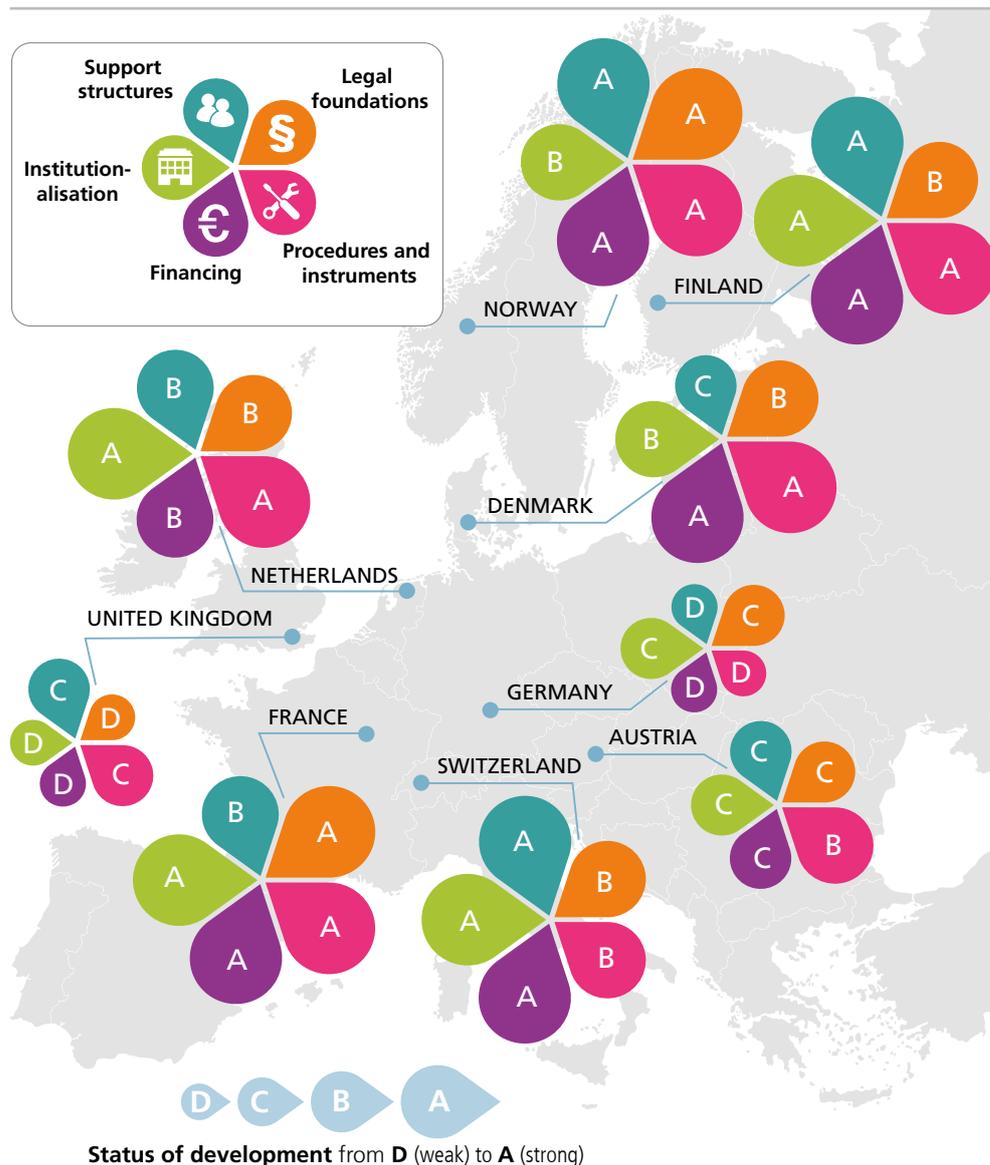
Support structures: users of complex recognition procedures require low-threshold access to information and guidance. In Finland, face-to-face advice and support is offered all over the country. There are also websites and online chats with experts, who impart information on qualifications and the validation procedure.

The grid proposed here is intended as an analytical tool for policy guidance in the field of the validation of competences acquired by non-formal and informal means. It supports the analysis of existing national validation practices with the aim of identifying good practice and deriving opportunities for transfer to other European states. Educational stakeholders and education and training policy are recommended to undertake the following steps to draw up a strategy for the (ongoing) development of a national validation system.

1. The country's own recognition system is *described* on the basis of the five core elements, and the status achieved is *evaluated* in accordance with a four-level scale. This foundation is used to *define* a specific *development goal*.
2. The *general framework conditions* of the vocational education and training system, such as degree of formalisation of VET, status of use of competence assessment and transparency instruments, competence orientation of formal vocational education and training and existing stakeholder structures, are all taken into account during this process.
3. Appropriate *transfer references are selected*, i.e. there is an identification of countries which are characterised by exhibiting sufficient proximity to the country's own VET system and by displaying more advanced validation practice. If deemed necessary, the empirical basis of the present study is expanded by considering *further country examples*.
4. *Transfer approaches are drawn up*. For this purpose, the validation system in the reference country or countries is examined in more detail, information on implementation strategies is obtained, desired and undesired effects are identified and system differences are stated which make modifications necessary for implementation in the country concerned.

The following figure of the countries forming the object of investigation shows a comparison of the status of development of a validation strategy along the five core elements in accordance with the quality criteria from D (weak) to A (strong).

European comparison



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