



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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2012/0234 (NLE)

Proposal for a

**COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION**

**on the validation of non-formal and informal learning**

{SWD(2012) 252 final}  
{SWD(2012) 253 final}

## **EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM**

### **1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL**

#### **The importance of creating new learning opportunities**

Today's learning opportunities are limitless, borderless and instantaneous. Individuals learn and acquire new skills and competences not only in the traditional setting of the classroom (formal learning) but more and more outside it. Important learning takes place at work, through participation in civil society organisations or in the virtual space provided by the internet and mobile devices, individually or with peers. Increasingly often, companies offer their workers training opportunities to upgrade their skills through organised, but non-formal, learning. Informal learning is also becoming increasingly important in a global and interconnected world where technology allows individuals to learn in a plethora of different ways through for example open educational resources and at a distance.

Engaging and empowering all learners with learning experiences is essential in order to cope with rapid economic and technological changes, more frequent job transitions throughout an individuals' lifetime and pushing individuals to acquire higher and more relevant skills to increase employability, productivity and economic growth.

In today's situation of rising unemployment - particularly acute among young people - and lack of economic growth, making use of new learning opportunities outside the formal system and of the skills acquired through these is urgent: Europe needs to develop the right mix of skills and achieve a better match between skills and jobs to help boost competitiveness and prosperity.

In such context, education and qualification systems need to give an opportunity to all citizens<sup>1</sup> to make visible what they have learnt outside school and to use it for their career or further learning. This can be achieved by a process of validation of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning; in this process an authorised body confirms that an individual has acquired learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) measured against a relevant standard.

#### **Non-formal and informal learning in the Europe 2020 Strategy**

Validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences in the EU Member States makes an essential contribution to EU's ambition to achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth set by the Europe 2020 Strategy. Its impact can be significant in the labour market functioning: validation mechanisms allow for more transparency on the skills available in the workforce and facilitate a better match between skills and labour demand, promote better transferability of skills between companies and sectors and facilitate mobility on the European labour market. By easing occupational and geographical mobility and allowing for a better skills match, validation can have an important impact in addressing skills shortages in growing sectors and support economic recovery,

In times of an ageing population and shrinking workforce, validation of informal and non-formal learning experiences can also help Europe bring those furthest away from the labour

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<sup>1</sup> This includes EU citizens and all third country nationals legally resident in the European Union.

market closer to new learning and work opportunities and tap into all human capital to combat unemployment, boost productivity and competitiveness. In particular, validation can support young unemployed looking for their first job or with very little professional experience to demonstrate and create a market value for their skills and competences acquired in different contexts.

From an individual perspective, validation brings prospects of enhanced employability, increased wages and career moves, easier transferability of skills across countries, second chances for those who have dropped out from school prematurely, improved access to formal education and training, greater motivation to learn and increased self-confidence.

Altogether the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences also contribute towards the achievement of the Europe 2020 headline targets for early school leaving, the proportion of 30-34 year olds having completed tertiary or equivalent education, the overall employment rate and poverty and social exclusion, a process that is followed up during the European Semester.

### **Building on Europe's policy agenda**

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been part of the European policy agenda since 2001 when the Commission defined lifelong learning as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. Since the Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training a series of initiatives have been taken to develop European tools and instruments in the area of lifelong learning:

- In 2004 **Common European principles on validation** were adopted in the form of Council Conclusions.
- In 2004 the **Europass** framework was established, including the Europass CV and a portfolio of documents which citizens can use to better communicate and present their qualifications and competences throughout Europe. Other tools for documenting learning outcomes concern the **Youthpass** for the Youth in Action Programme and **sectoral skills and qualification passports** developed under the European sectoral social dialogue.
- A major landmark towards the validation of non-formal and informal learning was the adoption in 2008 by the European Parliament and the Council of the Recommendation on the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)** for lifelong learning. The EQF is a reference framework of qualification levels defined through learning outcomes. It has resulted in an ongoing process under which all Member States are setting up their **National Qualification Framework** and reference their qualifications to the European qualification levels. Through this process qualifications will become more comparable and easier to understand for employers, educational establishments, workers and learners.
- In 2009 the Commission and Cedefop published **European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning** which provides policy-makers and practitioners with technical advice on validation. These focus on different validation perspectives (e.g. individual, organisational, national, European). The guidelines form a practical tool to be applied on a voluntary basis.

- Alongside the other tools credit systems based on learning outcomes facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning. For higher education this concerns the **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)**, which was developed under the Bologna process to facilitate mobility between higher education institutions. For vocational education and training this concerns the **European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)**.

In addition the Lifelong Learning Programme has, since 2007, financed a number of pilot projects which have enabled the development of validation processes and tools in specific sectors or contexts, particularly in vocational education and training and adult education. The European Social Fund has been used in some countries to develop validation systems.

Despite the existence of these European policies, progress in validation has been uneven, irregular and slow throughout Europe.

According to the latest update of the European Inventory of 2010 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning only four EU Member States have a highly developed validation system while a further seven have either a national system in its initial phase or a well-established, but partial, system of validation in one or more sectors.

### **The need for action now**

This means that the majority of EU Member States do not have a comprehensive validation system. The countries with a well-developed system have a mainstreamed approach to validation within their lifelong-learning system (e.g. legally anchored), an infrastructure supportive of validation, strong involvement of stakeholders (in particular social partners) and validation that is affordable for applicants. Some countries have recently taken initiatives on validation as part of the development of a National Qualification Framework. In other countries, limited developments have taken place, reflecting a lack of national strategies, a lack of knowledge on how to carry out validation in practice and - in some cases – a lack of trust in validation on the part of individuals and employers as well as cultural and attitudinal barriers.

The uneven availability of national validation policies and practices, as well as existing disparities between Member States, reduces the comparability and transparency of validation systems. They make it difficult for citizens to combine learning outcomes acquired in different settings, on different levels and in different countries. They create obstacles for the transnational mobility of learners and workers just when such mobility is needed to create more economic growth.

Given the urgent need to increase mobility of labour reducing shortages of skilled workforce, as well as for a better valuing of skills and competences acquired outside formal systems, the Commission has, in the Europe 2020 flagships "An agenda for New skills and Jobs"<sup>2</sup> and "Youth on the Move"<sup>3</sup> and its recent initiatives on the Single Market Act<sup>4</sup> and the Employment Package<sup>5</sup>, announced this proposal for a Council Recommendation on the

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<sup>2</sup> COM(2010) 682 final.

<sup>3</sup> COM(2010) 477 final.

<sup>4</sup> COM(2011) 206 final.

<sup>5</sup> COM(2012) 173 final.

validation of non-formal and informal learning as a contribution at EU level to accelerate the reform agenda.

EU action on validation, aiming at cooperation and coordination across Member States, can facilitate mobility of workers and learners through a better mutual recognition of non-formally and informally acquired skills. By introducing more cooperation and stronger coordination between Member States, the transparency of validation systems will increase and the mutual trust of Member States in each other's validation systems will be enhanced. Especially Member States with low trust levels and weak traditions in validating non-formal and informal learning can benefit from this. Mutual trust cannot be achieved as effectively by Member States alone without action at EU level.

Specific monitoring for the implementation of the Council Recommendation is part of the legal aspects of this proposal. The Commission will also follow the overall progress on validation of informal and non-formal learning across Member States within the framework of overall structural reforms for education and training monitored through the European Semester and the "Education and Training 2020" open method of coordination.

## **2. RESULTS OF CONSULTATIONS WITH THE INTERESTED PARTIES AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS**

### **Consultation**

Consultation has taken the following forms:

- An open consultation, through an online survey conducted between December 2010 and February 2011. Invitations to participate in the online survey and to submit a position paper were sent to members of the most relevant groups and other stakeholders in the areas of education and training, employment, youth and sport<sup>6</sup>.
- Discussion at meetings of policy bodies, in particular the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group;
- Specialist meetings and peer-learning activities organised by the Learning Outcomes Group operating under the EQF Advisory Group;
- Peer-learning activities in the fields of higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning.

The social partners, both employers and trade-union representatives, have been consulted as members of the EQF Advisory Group and through their participation in several peer-learning activities.

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<sup>6</sup> Permanent Representations to the EU, the Education Committee, European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group, Recognition of Learning Outcomes Group, Lifelong Learning Stakeholder Forum, Advisory Committee for Vocational Education and Training, European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training User Group, Adult Learning Working Group, Modernisation of Higher Education Working Group, Bologna Follow-up Group, Europass and Euroguidance centres, European Lifelong Guidance Policy network, Youthpass Advisory Board, National Academic Recognition Information Centres network, Higher Education Recognition of Prior Learning Network, Expert Group on the Mobility of Young Volunteers.

The above online survey resulted in 469 responses to the closed and open questions, complemented by 24 position papers. Responses were fairly evenly balanced between individuals (53%) and organisations (47%).

The results showed a lack of overall coherence in the approaches towards validation within and between Member States, as well as a large number of constraints on the effective implementation of validation in practice. Responses showed overwhelming consensus on the importance of making the skills gained through life and work experience visible. They showed broad support for a European initiative in order to enhance validation policy and practice in the EU Member States.

The consultation of the EQF Advisory Group and the various peer-learning activities also generated positive support for a European initiative on the validation.

## **Impact Assessment**

The impact assessment compared three options for European action in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning, namely (1) the baseline scenario consisting of the current situation and its expected evolution without further EU action, (2) a Council Recommendation on the implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning and (3) setting up a new process based on a new open method of coordination devoted to validation so as to develop of a European quality charter on validation.

The social, economic and other impacts of the three options considered were examined in qualitative terms based on likely impacts, as there are no hard data available.

Option 2, a Council Recommendation focusing on the implementation of validation, proved to be the most effective and efficient option, generating the largest positive economic and social impacts. It is the option most consistent with EU policy objectives. Under a Council Recommendation, Member States make a formal commitment to action. It is the most powerful available instrument within the area of soft law. Past experience, in particular with the EQF, has shown that it has the ability to generate peer pressure for action by Member States.

Concerning Option 1 (baseline scenario) the impact assessment revealed that the current situation of validation is expected to change only slowly in the absence of further action, implying that the limited availability and use of validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences, as well as the lack of a harmonised approach on validation across Europe, would persist.

Option 3 (a new OMC) would be expected to lead to improvements compared to the baseline scenario regarding impact effectiveness, efficiency and coherence with wider EU policy objectives. However, setting up a new OMC would create additional structures and additional reporting mechanisms, increasing the administrative burden and costs for the Member States. Moreover it would not provide sufficient guarantees of the adoption of validation measures within a reasonable timeframe, since its success would rely exclusively on the OMC method.

The impact assessment also revealed the following advantages of a Council Recommendation focusing on implementation, when compared to the other two options:

- It will fill the validation gap which currently exists within the available European tools and instruments, such as the EQF, Europass and credit systems. It will in particular remedy a shortcoming of the European Qualifications Framework, which

provides for the promotion of validation of non-formal and informal learning, but gives no further guidance on its implementation;

- It proposes concrete practical measures for the implementation of validation in the Member States;
- A Council Recommendation, as a legal instrument, signals the commitment of Member States to the measures set out, most of which will require implementation at national level and adaptation to the national context;
- It explicitly involves relevant stakeholders (labour-market stakeholders, youth/voluntary organisations, education and training institutions) in the development of validation systems;
- Member States will continue to cooperate within existing OMC structures, in particular the EQF Advisory Group, representing a simpler implementation structure than foreseen under Option 3;
- It will form a new and stronger political basis for cooperation in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

### **3. LEGAL ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSAL**

#### **Summary of the proposed actions**

The proposed actions include practical recommendations to Member States to provide by 2015 every citizen with the opportunity to have his/her skills acquired outside formal education and training systems validated and to use this validation for working and learning purposes throughout Europe. On a more concrete level, these actions entail the following recommendations to Member States:

- To ensure that by 2015 national systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning have been established providing the opportunity to all citizens to have their knowledge, skills and competences validated, irrespective of the contexts where the learning took place. This validation provides the basis on which the award of a full or partial qualification takes place, with no prejudice to other applicable Union law, in particular Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications;
- National systems of validation of non-formal and informal learning should focus on the following four aspects of validation: the identification of learning outcomes, their documentation, their assessment against agreed standards and finally their certification;
- In the form appropriate to each national context, to ensure that information on validation opportunities is widely available (in particular to disadvantaged groups), that access to validation is affordable for citizens who wish to undertake a validation procedure, that appropriate guidance and counselling is available and affordable for citizens who wish to undertake a validation procedure and that transparent quality-assurance mechanisms are established and applied to the validation system in relation

to both the assessment (methodologies and tools, qualified assessors) and its results (agreed standards);

- Provide individuals with the opportunity to undergo an audit of their skills and competences within three months of an identified need such as the perspective of unemployment or insecure forms of employment. For this purpose the use of the current and future Europass tools to facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes should be promoted. The links between validation arrangements and credit systems such as ECTS and ECVET should be strengthened;
- Involve social partners and other relevant stakeholders, namely employer organisations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, industry and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers as well as civil society organisations in the development of the validation mechanisms and in documenting the learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
- promote partnerships and other initiatives to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes developed within SMEs and other small organisations;
- Provide incentives to employers, youth organisations and civil society organisations to promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities;
- Provide incentives to education and training providers to facilitate access to formal education and training and to grant exemptions on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and ensure co-ordination between education, training, employment and youth implementation services as well as between relevant policies.

The EQF Advisory Group will be the main body overseeing the actions proposed under this recommendation. The proposed measures also foresee reporting on the follow-up of the actions in the Joint Commission and Council Report published under the Education and Training 2020 Strategy. Finally, the annual Cedefop report on the development of National Qualification Frameworks in Europe will assess progress in establishing national systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The proposed actions call on the Commission to: 1) regularly update the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning; 2) facilitate effective peer-learning and exchange of experience and good practice allowing the least developed countries in validation to benefit from the experiences in the most developed countries; 3) in cooperation with the Member States, ensure that the European programmes for education, training, and youth and the European Structural Funds support the follow-up of this Recommendation and 4) assess and evaluate, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting stakeholders, the follow-up of the proposed actions.

### **Legal basis**

Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union foresee the Union to contribute to the development of quality education and to implement a vocational training policy by encouraging co-operation between Member States, where necessary

supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and vocational training.

The current initiative recommends common lines of action to be implemented at the level of the Member States with some European support. It will propose actions that will need implementation at EU and Member State level. The EU level will provide coordination including in particular coordination with the relevant European instruments and support, for instance by organising peer-learning activities. Member States will remain entirely responsible for the design, development and implementation of their arrangements (laws, regulations, collective agreements) for the validation of non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes. Action at the two levels is complementary and the prerogatives of Member States are safeguarded.

Proposal for a

**COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION**

**on the validation of non-formal and informal learning**

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) Validation of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) acquired through non-formal and informal learning, including through open educational resources, is essential for citizens' access to the labour-market and to lifelong-learning.
- (2) At a time when the European Union is confronted with a serious economic crisis causing a surge in unemployment, validation of all relevant knowledge, skills and competences, no matter how they have been acquired, is more relevant than ever for the functioning of the labour market and for enhancing competitiveness and economic growth.
- (3) Employer organisations, individual employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers as well as civil society organisations are key stakeholders in the supply of non-formal and informal learning opportunities and in any validation processes thereafter.
- (4) The Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth 2010<sup>7</sup> calls for the development of skills and competences for achieving economic growth and employment; the Flagship initiatives thereof<sup>8</sup> emphasise the need for more flexible learning pathways that can facilitate transitions between the phases of work and learning and that should also allow for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

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<sup>7</sup> COM(2010) 2020 final.

<sup>8</sup> Youth on the Move, COM(2010) 477 final, The Agenda for new Skills and Jobs, COM(2010) 682 final.

- (5) The Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)<sup>9</sup> noted that lifelong-learning should be designed to cover learning in all contexts whether formal, non-formal or informal.
- (6) The 'EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering; a renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities' of 2009<sup>10</sup> calls for better recognition of skills acquired through non-formal education for young people; it stressed the need for full use to be made of the range of tools established at EU level for the validation of skills and the recognition of qualifications. It was endorsed by the Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)<sup>11</sup>.
- (7) In the Bruges Communiqué of December 2010<sup>12</sup>, the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission declared that participating countries should start to develop, no later than 2015, national procedures for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, supported as appropriate by National Qualifications Frameworks.
- (8) The Council Conclusions on the modernisation of higher education of 28 and 29 November 2011 called upon Member States to develop clear routes into higher education from vocational and other types of education, as well as mechanisms for recognising prior learning and experience gained outside formal education and training, especially by tackling challenges related to the implementation and use of national qualification frameworks linked to the European Qualification Framework<sup>13</sup>.
- (9) The Council Resolution of 20 December 2011 on a renewed European agenda for adult learning defined as one of its priority areas for the period 2012-14 the putting in place of fully functional systems for validating non-formal and informal learning and promoting their use by adults of all ages and at all qualification levels, as well as by enterprises and other organisations<sup>14</sup>.
- (10) The Commission underlined in the Single Market Act<sup>15</sup> that increased mobility of skilled labour will make the European economy become more competitive and in the Employment package of 17<sup>th</sup> April 2012<sup>16</sup> the need to improve the cooperation between the world of work and the world of training.
- (11) The Council Resolution on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training of 12 November 2002<sup>17</sup> and the Copenhagen

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<sup>9</sup> OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> COM(2009) 200 final.

<sup>11</sup> OJ C 311, 19.12.2009, p.1.

<sup>12</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges_en.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> OJ C 372, of 20.12.2011, p.36.

<sup>14</sup> OJ C 372, of 20.12.2011, p.1.

<sup>15</sup> COM(2011) 206 final.

<sup>16</sup> COM (2012) 173 final.

<sup>17</sup> OJ C 13, 18.1.2003

Declaration of 30 November 2002<sup>18</sup> requested the development of a set of common principles regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

- (12) The Council Conclusions of 18 May 2004 adopted common European principles on the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>19</sup>.
- (13) A European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning containing up-to-date information on current validation practices in European countries has been regularly published since 2004<sup>20</sup> and European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning were published in 2009<sup>21</sup>.
- (14) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong-learning of 23 April 2008<sup>22</sup> stated that all qualifications should be attainable through formal, non-formal and informal learning; it also invited Member States to relate their national qualifications levels to the European Qualifications Framework and where appropriate, to develop National Qualifications Frameworks which promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- (15) The Decision of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 December 2004<sup>23</sup> established Europass, a European portfolio which citizens can use to better communicate, record and present their competences and qualifications throughout Europe.
- (16) The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) established under the Bologna process awards credits for formal learning based on learning outcomes and student workload, and also facilitates the award by higher-education institutions of credits based on learning outcomes for non-formal and informal learning experiences.
- (17) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 established a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)<sup>24</sup>, to be used for the transfer, recognition and accumulation of individuals' learning outcomes achieved in formal and, where appropriate, non-formal and informal contexts.
- (18) Consultations in the form of an online survey<sup>25</sup>, discussions in relevant policy bodies as well as a variety of peer-learning activities with the participation of the social partners, showed overwhelming consensus on the importance of making visible the skills gained through life and work experience and showed broad support for a

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<sup>18</sup> Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November 2002, on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/pdf/doc125\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/pdf/doc125_en.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/informal/validation2004\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/informal/validation2004_en.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/index.aspx>.

<sup>21</sup> Cedefop, 2009, [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/4054\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/4054_en.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p.1.

<sup>23</sup> OJ L 390, 31.12.2004, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/consult/vnfil/report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/consult/vnfil/report_en.pdf).

European initiative to enhance validation policy and practice in the EU Member States,

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

1. Member States should, with a view to offering to all citizens<sup>26</sup> the opportunity to prove what they have learned outside school and to use it for their career and further learning:
  - (1) Ensure, by 2015, that a national system of validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>27</sup> is established providing the opportunity for citizens to
    - i) have their skills, knowledge and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning, including via open educational resources, validated, and
    - ii) obtain a full or partial qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences, with no prejudice to other applicable Union law, in particular Directive 2005/36/EC<sup>28</sup> on the recognition of professional qualifications;
  - (2) Ensure that the national system of validation of non-formal and informal learning includes the following elements:
    - Support to citizens in the identification of their learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
    - Assistance to citizens in documenting their learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
    - Assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
    - Certification of the results of the assessment of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of a qualification, as credits leading to a qualification or as otherwise appropriate.

It should be ensured that every citizen can take advantage of any of the aforementioned opportunities separately or in combination, according to their needs.
  - (3) Ensure that national systems of validation of non-formal and informal learning, while taking into consideration national, regional and/or local as well as sectoral needs, respect the following principles:

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<sup>26</sup> EU citizens as well as third country national legally resident in the Union.

<sup>27</sup> Terms as defined in Annex I.

<sup>28</sup> OJ L 255, 30.9.2005, p.22.

- The validation system is a coherent and integral part of the national qualifications framework developed in line with the European Qualifications Framework;
  - Information on validation opportunities is widely available to individuals and organisations;
  - Disadvantaged groups, including those citizens most likely to be subject to unemployment or insecure forms of employment, are specifically targeted by the validation system as it can increase their participation in lifelong learning and their access to the labour market;
  - Individuals, in situations of unemployment or insecure forms of employment, are provided with the opportunity to undergo an audit of their skills and competences within three months of an identified need;
  - Access to validation is affordable for citizens who wish to undertake a validation procedure;
  - Appropriate guidance and counselling is available and affordable for individuals who wish to undertake a validation procedure;
  - Transparent quality assurance measures are in place that support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools;
  - Development of the professional competence of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors is ensured;
  - The qualifications obtained by means of the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences respect agreed standards that are the same or equivalent to the standards of qualifications obtained through formal education programmes;
  - The use of the current and future tools of the Europass framework to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes is promoted;
  - Synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, e.g. ECTS and ECVET;
- (4) Ensure the involvement of relevant stakeholders such as employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers as well as civil society organisations, in the development and implementation of the components and mechanisms referred to in points 2 and 3, together with providing incentives:
- to employers, youth organisations and civil society organisations to promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities, using relevant tools (in particular the tools developed under the Europass framework);

- to education and training providers to facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings;
- (5) Ensure coordination between education, training, employment and youth implementation services as well as between relevant policies.
2. Member States and the Commission should take the following measures:
- (1) Ensure the follow up of this Recommendation by the EQF Advisory Group<sup>29</sup> and ensure the involvement in subsequent EQF Advisory Group activities, of relevant youth organisations and representatives of the voluntary sector;
  - (2) Report on the progress made following the adoption of this Recommendation in the next Joint Report by the Commission and the Council published under the Education and Training 2020 Strategy in 2015 and in the subsequent Joint Reports;
  - (3) Support the implementation of this Recommendation by using the expertise of Union Agencies, in particular Cedefop, through reporting on the establishment of the national system of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the annual report on the development of National Qualification Frameworks and through supporting the Commission in regularly updating the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.
3. The Commission should:
- (1) Support Member States and stakeholders by:
    - Facilitating effective peer-learning and exchange of experiences and good practices;
    - Regularly updating the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning summarised in Annex II;
  - (2) Further develop instruments under the Europass Framework which facilitate the transparency and recognition across the Union of validated learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning experiences;
  - (3) Ensure that in cooperation with the Member States, the Lifelong-Learning and Youth in Action Programmes, the future European programme for education, training, youth and sports and the European Structural Funds support the implementation of this Recommendation;
  - (4) Assess and evaluate, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, the action taken in response to this

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<sup>29</sup> Set up by the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, OJ C 111/1, of 6.5.2012, p.1.

Recommendation, and report to the Council by 31 July 2017 on the experience gained and implications for the future, including if necessary the possible review and revision of this Recommendation.

Done at Brussels,

*For the Council*  
*The President*

## ANNEX I DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this recommendation, the following definitions shall apply:

- (a) *Formal learning* takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning, and typically leads to the award of a qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma. This includes the systems of general education, initial vocational training and higher education.
- (b) *Non-formal learning* concerns learning that takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. student-teacher relationships). It may cover programmes to impart work-skills, adult literacy and basic education for early school leavers. Very common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training, through which companies update and improve the skills of their workers such as ICT skills, structured online learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target group or the general public.
- (c) *Informal learning* is learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning may be unintentional from the learner's perspective. Examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are skills acquired through life and work experiences. Examples are project management skills or ICT skills acquired at work; languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country; ICT skills acquired outside work, skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work and through activities at home (e.g. taking care of a child).
- (d) A *qualification* means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.
- (e) *Learning outcomes* means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences.
- (f) A *national qualification framework* is a coherent and comprehensive description of qualification levels based on learning outcomes.
- (g) *Validation* is a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard. It consists of four distinct phases: (1) identification through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual, (2) documentation – to make visible the individual's experiences – (3) a formal assessment of these experiences and (4) recognition leading to a certification for example a partial or full qualification.

**ANNEX II:**  
**Summary of the guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning**

**Effective practice: the European Perspective**

The practice of validating informal and non-formal learning should be compatible with the main elements in the 2004 European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, the European principles for quality assurance of education and training, and the recommendation for a European quality assurance reference framework for VET.

European cooperation in validation should be further developed, in particular by regularly updating and improving these guidelines and the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

European level tools and frameworks (European qualifications framework, Europass, European credit systems, etc.) could be used to promote validation and to improve comparability and transparency of the outcomes of validation processes and so build trust across national boundaries.

**Effective practice: the national perspective**

Validation of non-formal and informal learning should be seen as an integral part of the national qualifications system.

The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the ‘identification’ of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part lifelong learning.

Summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework).

The entitlement to validation could be considered in cases where non-formal and informal learning is seen as a normal route to a qualification, parallel to formal education and training.

The development of national qualifications frameworks could be used as an opportunity to integrate validation systematically into qualifications systems.

The introduction of validation as an integral part of a national qualifications framework could be linked to the need to improve access to, progression within and transfer of qualifications.

The sustainability and coherence of national systems of validation should be supported by regular cost-benefit analysis.

**Effective practice: the organisational perspective**

Formal education, enterprises, adult education providers and voluntary organisations are key stakeholders in providing opportunities to validate non-formal and informal learning.

Validating non-formal and informal learning poses challenges to formal education in terms of the range of learning that can be validated and how this process can be integrated into the formal curriculum and its assessment.

There are major advantages for enterprises in setting up systems to document the knowledge, skills and competences of employees. Enterprises need to balance their legitimate interests as employers with the legitimate interests of individual employees.

The adult education sector is a major contributor to non-formal and informal learning and its further development should be supported by systematic development of formative and summative validation.

The third (or voluntary) sector offers a wide range of personalised learning opportunities that are highly valued in other settings. Validation should be used to make visible and value the outcomes of this learning, as well as assist their transfer to other settings.

The functions of the different bodies involved in validation require coordination through an institutional framework.

The institutional route to validation and certification should not lead to certificates that are seen as of different status on the basis of the route taken to achieve them.

### **Effective practice: the individual**

The centre of the validation process is the individual. The activities of other agencies involved in validation should be considered in the light of their impact on the individual.

Everyone should have access to validation and the emphasis on motivation to engage in the process is particularly important.

The multiple stage process of validation offers individuals many opportunities for deciding about the future direction of their validation. Decision-making should be supported by information, advice and guidance.

### **Effective practice: validation process structure**

The three processes of orientation, assessment and external audit can be used to evaluate existing validation procedures and support the development of new validation procedures.

### **Effective practice: the methods**

Methods of validating non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools that are used in assessing formal learning.

When used for validation, tools have to be adopted, combined and applied in a way which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning.

Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose.

### **Effective practice: validation practitioners**

Effective operation of validation processes depends fundamentally on professional input by counsellors, assessors and validation process administrators. The preparation and continuous training of these people is critically important.

Networking that enables experience sharing and the full functioning of a community of practice should be a part of a development programme for practitioners.

Interaction between practitioners in a single validation process is likely to lead to more efficient and effective practices that support individuals seeking validation.