

# The 2014 European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

Prospects and trends on validation in Europe<sup>1</sup>



**ERNESTO VILLALBA-GARCÍA**  
Dr., Expert,  
Cedefop Thessaloniki



**MANUEL SOUTO-OTERO**  
Dr., Senior Lecturer in Educa-  
tion, University of Bath and  
ICF international Birmingham



**ILONA MURPHY**  
Dr., Senior Expert, ICF Inter-  
national Birmingham<sup>2</sup>

**The European Inventory is a tool produced under the auspices of the European Commission and has been in place since 2004. It presents an overview of the situation regarding validation in European countries. The 2014 Inventory investigates 33 countries through 36 country reports. After describing the political context for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe, namely the European Council Recommendation of December 2012, the article explains the main features of the European Inventory and presents selected findings.**

## The 2012 Recommendation on validation

The importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning has been strongly emphasised within the context of the development of lifelong learning policies in Europe over the last decade. Validation has acquired an increasingly central part in most of the educational discourse of the EU: general education, vocational education and training (VET), higher education and adult education. The Recommendation of the European Council on validation of non-formal and informal learning of December 2012 can be regarded as the beginning of a new stage for validation in Europe.

It signals an enhanced level of political commitment, calling all Member States to establish by 2018 arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Recommendation is significant in that it sets a date and introduces a coordinating body that is responsible for its follow up: the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG). It also identifies the systems that will be used for the reporting and monitoring of the situation concerning validation and allows for the continuous development of supporting tools, notably the European Inventory and the European Guidelines.

The Recommendation states that national arrangements should enable individuals to make visible the knowledge, skills and competences they have acquired through non-formal or informal means. EU countries should, moreover, provide opportunities to obtain qualifications on the

basis of learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning. The Recommendation also establishes that validation encompasses four stages: Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification of learning outcomes (for a full or part qualification). This differentiation of stages and possibilities for validation is important since it makes clear that validation can meet different individual needs and objectives.

It also establishes principles for the validation arrangements. It indicates the importance of linking validation arrangements to national qualifications frameworks – and thus be aligned to the EQF. In addition, the qualifications obtained on the basis of non-formal or informal learning should refer to the same standards as traditional qualifications, or equivalent standards. It also calls Member States to ensure that skills audits are offered to all individuals within six months of an identified need – for instance, to help overcome unemployment. The Recommendation also indicates the importance of having transparent quality assurance measures. To this end, the Recommendation calls for the adequate provision of professional development opportunities of staff involved in validation. Following the

<sup>1</sup> The current article does not constitute policy and might not necessarily present the views of the European Commission, Cedefop or the European Qualification Framework Advisory Group.

<sup>2</sup> Jo HAWLEY from ICF International contributed also to the article with valuable comments and input to the analysis.

general idea of lifelong learning, it also encourages the widely availability of information and guidance targeted, especially, to disadvantaged groups, such as low-skilled immigrants and people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment. Finally, the Recommendation also asks Member States to make full use of EU transparency tools (Europass, Youthpass) and to find synergies with credit systems (ECTS and ECVET), assuring coherence between different European tools that can contribute to the implementation of validation procedures. This article presents information from the Inventory that illustrates some of these aspects.

### The European Inventory on validation – Objectives, Scope and Data Collection

The Inventory consists of a series of country reports that present the situation in each of the countries it covers, as well as a range of other specific outcomes (for instance in-depth case studies and thematic reports) that differ from edition to edition. The first Inventory was undertaken in 2004 and was updated in 2005, 2008 and 2010. The 2014 Inventory is its fifth update<sup>3</sup>. The 2014 Inventory maintains, to the extent possible, a similar structure to the 2010 reports in order to assure continuity and the possibility to measure »progress made«. But at the same time, it has also introduced variations to take into account new political priorities outlined in the 2012 Recommendation. The objective of the 2014 update of the European Inventory on validation is to provide an accurate picture of the situation regarding validation arrangements across Europe. It aims at consolidating the Inventory as a reference source of information on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe.

The 2014 Inventory consists of a total of 36 country updates (two reports were prepared for Belgium and three for the UK) for 33 countries (all Member States, Switzerland, Turkey, Iceland, Norway, and Lichtenstein). There are also eight in-depth thematic reports that further explore specific aspects of validation such as the quality assurance or the governance of validation arrangements, and two case studies of specific validation projects of special interest. The inventory outputs are completed with a synthesis report and an executive summary (all can be found at

#### DATA COLLECTION

The data collection for the Inventory was carried out during September–November 2013. Based on desk research and information gathered through national contacts and a range of stakeholder interviews, the country experts produced a country report and two corresponding country fiches, one for 2014 and one for 2010 (containing 27 questions in total each). The first drafts of the country reports were shared with the EQF AG that provided comments and additional information on their respective countries. In addition, other (up to two) country experts commented on the reports. This input was processed by the authors of the country reports and sent back to the EQF AG for final review. The reports present information up to January 2014. The reports are the responsibility of each author and should not be seen as position papers from the EQF AG. The results presented below are this article author's reading of the information collected in the Inventory.

[www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation)). The 2014 update has also produced country fiches which use a common template to summarise main aspects of validation in each country covered, as assessed by a country expert.

#### First insights of the 2014 inventory

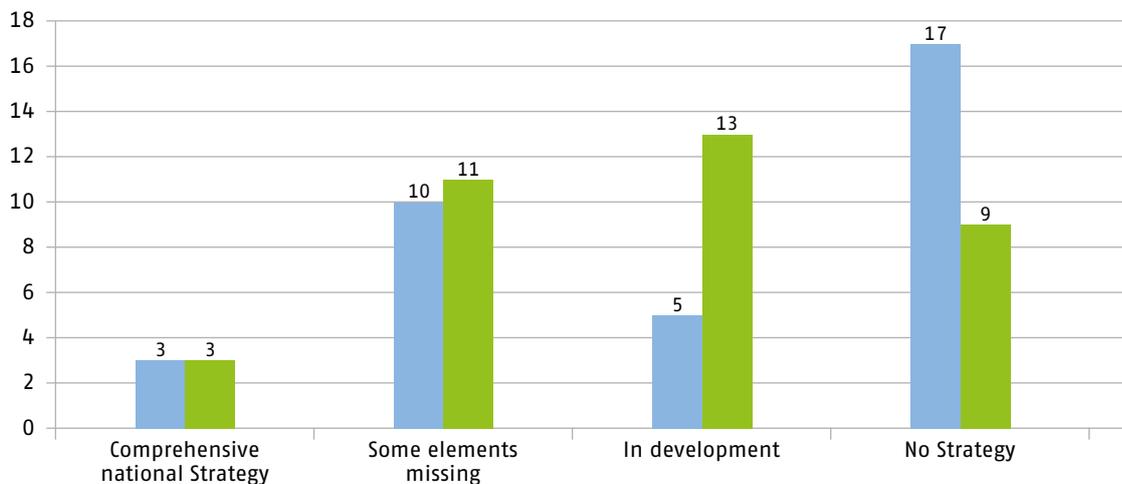
The comprehensive definition on validation and its four distinct phases (Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification) makes validation a complex phenomenon to study. It involves many different levels, institutions and sectors. Because of this, it is possible to say that in all countries some aspects of validation have been developed in different sectors (public, private and voluntary), and that validation of non-formal and informal learning is possible to a certain extent in all European countries. However, when looking more closely at the level of development, the picture is very heterogeneous across and within European countries.

There are not only differences in the level of implementation, countries also differ in the way they are approaching validation. The country fiches explore the extent to which validation strategies have been developed. Having a national strategy was understood for the purpose of the Inventory as having comprehensive arrangements covering all education sectors and establishing strong connections between them. It also includes strong connections between validation in the public, private and third sector and having concrete measures in place to favour take-up as well as ensuring the quality of validation procedures. In 2010 and 2014 three countries were considered within this category (Spain, Finland and France). At the time of writing the Inventory, Portugal, that had a comprehensive strategy in 2010, was redesigning their system, so it was difficult to say if their new approach would comply with all the requirements, but it is likely to do so. In 2014, eleven countries had a national strategy, but some of the elements

<sup>3</sup> The current update has been financed by the European Commission and carried out by IFC International under the supervision of a Steering Committee compound of policy officers from the European Commission (KOEN NONDEM, CHIARA RIONDINO, MARTINA NI CHEALLAIGH, FABIENNE METAMAYER, MADIS GRAVAS) and Cedefop (ERNESTO VILLALBA, JENS BJØRNÅVOLD). MANUEL SOUTO, JO HAWLEY and ILONA MURPHY managed the project. They coordinated a team of country experts from each of the countries covered by the 2014 Inventory. The Inventory has benefited from the involvement and input of the European Qualification Framework Advisory Group.

Figure 1

Does the country have a national (or where relevant, regional) strategy or policy for validation?



Source: 2014 European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Note: The analysis separates UK into three (England together with Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland) and Belgium into two (Flanders and Wallonia). For 2010 no information from Wales was reported.

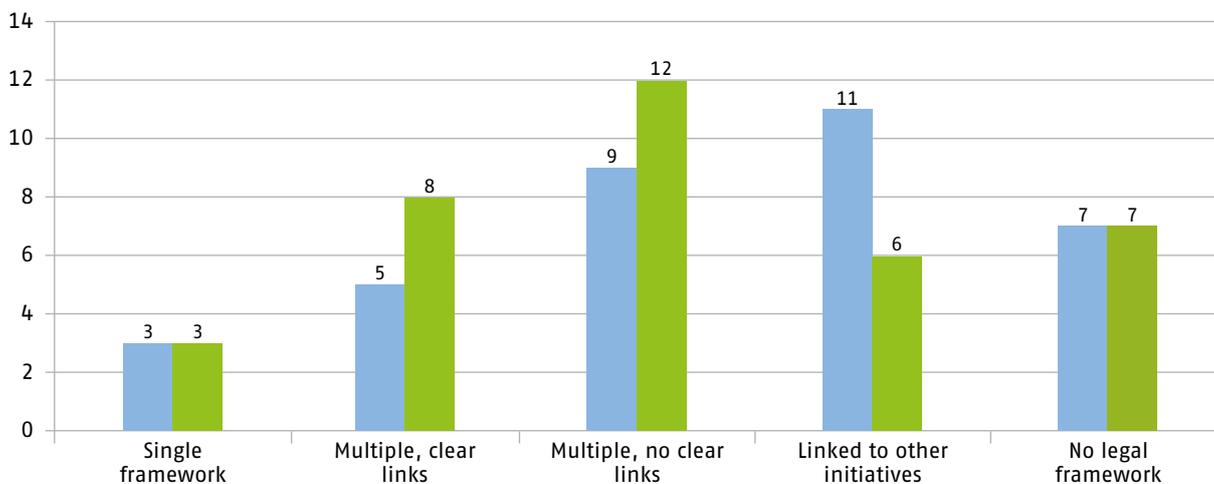
described above were missing (cf. figure 1). In most cases, countries have developed validation in one specific sector of education and connection between different sectors had not been well established. In addition, most countries lacked the connection to private or third sector validation arrangements. The number of countries that reported not having a national strategy decreased from 17 countries in 2010 to nine countries in 2014. Countries that did not have a strategy in 2010 are now moving towards a more strategic approach to validation: 13 countries reported being in the process of developing a strategy in 2014, versus five in 2010. This is likely to be a result of the European Recommendation on validation and the deadline of 2018 it contained. It should also be noted that given the stringent definition of »national strategy« adopted for this project, a country that is deemed not to have a national strategy might have comprehensive sectoral strategies in place, or considerable activity taking place at ground level, but this may simply not be brought together into a single strategy. National strategies are still fragmented. This relates, in many cases, to the existence of multiple legal frameworks for validation. In 2014, only three countries reported having a single framework covering validation (cf. figure 2). 20 countries reported having multiple frameworks: eight countries with clear links between the different frameworks and twelve having multiple frameworks with not clear links. Seven countries have legal frameworks for specific sectors, and are planning to develop them further, creating a more comprehensive framework. In Belgium-Flanders, for example, there are separate measures in place for validation in most of the sectors but connections between

the different parts of the system are not yet well-established. The legal framework for validation might also be connected to other initiatives, and not be exclusively for validation. This is the case in six countries.

The 2012 Recommendation calls Member States to ensure that »validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the EQF« (Council of the European Union 2012, C398/3). Validation is normally one of the topics of discussion in the development of NQF. Often, in the majority of EU countries, the documents outlining the national qualification frameworks (e.g. referencing reports) explicitly indicate as one of their objectives the improvement of validation arrangements. Of the 36 country reports of the 2014 inventory 16 mentioned that discussions had taken place around the connection between the national qualifications framework and validation arrangements. 20 reports suggest that the countries they cover have established this link, at least partially or in relation to some specific qualifications. The link in some cases may only be implicit and in draft form, pending further developments of the qualification framework or is related to only few qualifications. It is important to note that the reported linkages may be of different nature, and may imply rather different levels of integration. Most countries have started the development of NQFs focusing on formal education qualifications. This means that their qualification frameworks only include qualifications obtained through the formal education system, whereas other qualifications are not considered (for example those granted by private bodies, or regulated by the labour market agencies). In several countries, some of

Figure 2

Does the country have a legal framework which frames the arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning?



Source: 2014 European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Note: The analysis separates UK into three (England together with Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland) and Belgium into two (Flanders and Wallonia). For 2010 no information from Wales was reported.

these (which could be considered ›non-formally acquired‹) qualifications are in fact the ones with clearer procedures for validation. In addition, the validation procedures for the acquisition of all NQF qualifications may not necessarily be well established; these procedures may pertain only to a small number of qualifications within the framework. Thus, the linkage between validation and NQF needs to be further developed.

## Conclusions

What can be concluded from our review? Since the 2010 Inventory there has been definite progress, albeit at a relatively steady pace. The European Council Recommendation on validation seems to be pushing Member States further in terms of thinking and designing coherent strategies for their validation arrangements. Although there are possibilities for validation of non-formal and informal learning, these are still rather fragmented and connection between its different components and different sectors is still in progress. Involvement of private organisations and the third sector is still a challenge. To this end, it seems that the development of NQFs can provide a forum for discussion that facilitates the inclusion of a wider set of stakeholders, including private and voluntary sector stakeholders, in validation. However, more needs to be done in this respect. On the whole, validation is more common in VET and in relation to those qualifications that are closer to the labour market than in relation to general education qualifications. Having said this, higher education institutions seem to be allowing increasingly large exemptions of credits or parts

of formal education HE programmes. Qualifications granted by the public employment offices (for example the VET certificates in the Czech Republic or certificados de profesionalidad in Spain, or the HRDA qualifications in Cyprus) or related to the performance of a specific profession are normally the ones that make more use of validation. Although there is a burgeoning debate on how to connect those to formal qualifications and how to integrate them into the NQF, few countries have arrived to that position of having a clearly defined link. In the coming years, with further implementation of NQFs it is likely that countries will work towards that end. ◀

## Literature

COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01) 2012 – URL: [www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/Council\\_Recommendation\\_on\\_the\\_validation\\_20\\_December\\_2012.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/Council_Recommendation_on_the_validation_20_December_2012.pdf) (retrieved 07.08.2014)

EUROPEAN COMMISSION: Communication from the Commission, Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality. COM(2001) 678 final. Brussels 2001 – URL: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2001:0678:FIN:EN:PDF> (retrieved 07.08.2014)

EUROPEAN COMMISSION; CEDEFOP; ICF INTERNATIONAL: European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

EUROPEAN COMMISSION; CEDEFOP; GHK. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT; COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning. In: Official Journal of the European Union, C 111, 06.05.2008, pp. 1–7 – URL: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF> (retrieved 07.08.2014)