



# VALIDATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES: OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATION



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## **POLICY STATE OF PLAY**

Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning at European level

- Koen Nomden, European Commission, Implementation of the 2012 Council Recommendation and new Guidelines on Validation, key challenges ahead
- Pavel Trantina, European Economic and Social Committee, EESC opinion on the input of organised civil society to the recognition of skills and qualifications

## **PANEL 1**

Development of validation mechanisms learning: Implications for non-formal education

- Mayri Tiido, Presentation of GR-EAT Project by AEGEE
- Thomas Tugulescu, Survey on the recognition of NFL by employers, EUCIS-LLL
- Sharon Watson, Building Learning Societies (SOLIDAR) Expert, WEA, United Kingdom

## **PANEL 2**

Validation at national level: tools and initiatives that are being developed

- Lourdes Mirón Confederación de Centros Juveniles Don Bosco de España and Angel Gudiña, Spanish Youth Council (CJE), Spain
- Eberhard Funk, Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge, Germany
- Ana-Maria Gradinariu, VOLUM, Romania

## **CONCLUSION**

We would like to say a special thank you to Márcio Barcelos from the European Youth Forum for the moderation of the debate.

# VALIDATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATION**

We are what we do, and yet, only part of what we do is recognised by others, namely employers and formal education institutions. But how many young people and adults engage in non-formal and informal learning processes? How many volunteer? How much do these activities add not only to their competences and skills, but also personalities? And in spite of the huge benefits such activities produce, quid of their recognition and validation?

The European Union in its various institutions has emitted guidelines to be implemented in Member States in order to support individuals increase their certifications. Nevertheless, not only do they reach the conclusion that gaps still exist between policy and reality, pointing to the opportunities still left to seize, but the question is also to know whether these

policies are not a threat to non-formal and informal learning, namely due to the formalisation they might force them into.

This policy debate, which brought together policy-makers and field actors, from EU to regional level, discussed the impact of EU and national policy developments around the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning and the progress made in the establishment of validation arrangements at national level thanks to a showcase of innovative practices and success stories. Because it is a source of non-formal and informal learning, the debate focused on the recognition of competences gained through volunteering, with a presentation of initiatives run by civil society organisations in youth work and adult education.

The Debate was opened with the welcome words by Márcio Barcelos from the European Youth Forum, and Gina Ebner, member of EUCIS-LLL Steering Committee.

# POLICY STATE OF PLAY

## RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

### Koen Nomden

DG EMPL, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Koen Nomden introduced the debate putting the EU Recommendations and new Guidelines on validation into context, framing the key challenges and providing participants with a policy calendar.

He started by reminding the audience of the content and objectives of the Council Recommendations on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning of 20th December 2012. These recommendations invite Member States to implement validation mechanisms by 2018 based on a number of principles.



Their objective is to enable individuals to obtain qualifications on the basis of their validated experience. If this system is also an instrument for the professional development of staff, its main target is disadvantaged groups and individuals.

According to the Recommendations, validation follows four steps: identifying and documenting relevant experience, assessing it, and finally, delivering a certification. Validation arrangements should be linked to national qualifications framework and with the European one (EQF) to ensure the qualifications obtained through that process are equivalent to those obtained in formal education. Transparent quality assurance measures supporting reliable, valid and credible validation methodologies and tools, including EU transparency ones, should be available. Such mechanisms will be efficient so long as proper information and guidance is made available.

In this construction, key actors are Member States, the European Commission and Cedefop, represented in the EQF Advisory Group. Nonetheless, he added that

this system rests on the involvement of all stakeholders (employers, youth and civil society organisations) who contribute to promoting and facilitating documentation and access to further learning, which hopefully concludes in the deliverance of such certifications.

Two years following the Council's text, the "2014 European Inventory on Validation" was published, showing that validation has increased, in activity and stakeholders' involvement, especially in education and training. However, the Inventory also shows a strong disparity between States, which calls for further coordination in the development of NQFs. These findings also directed the soon to be published 2015 revision of the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, first published by the European Commission and Cedefop in 2009. In light of these policies, the next steps will be to update the Inventory (2016 and 2018) and emit national reports and deliver a political response to the Council Recommendations (2018).



### Pavel Trantina

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

Pavel Trantina from the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) completed the introductory remarks with a civil society perspective and the latter's practical inputs in designing validation of learning outcomes.

Validating non-formal learning has indeed been a challenge within the EESC, as trade unions (Group II within the Committee) were for a long time reluctant to recognise certifications gained outside the formal sphere of learning. However, they were gradually convinced of the necessity to rethink education in order to include as many individuals as possible, thus giving them a chance in our society. But convincing social partners was not the only challenge, and

on volunteering in particular, he said the EESC is closely observing the Commission's work on the European Skills Passport, which should include experience gained through volunteering, containing numerous soft and vocational skills that may also be self-assessed. If progress has been made, areas of discussion remain and further achievements call for collaboration and cooperation of all stakeholders involved and at all steps of the validation process, from information and guidance to establishing tools for recognition.

Mr. Trantina, enunciating some EESC recommendations, stressed that if opportunities are to be given for people at all ages, the focus needs to be

on raising awareness, meaning Member States should broaden the range of institutions enabled to provide information on validation, including formal education institutions. He also said how much civil society organisations, thanks to their field experience, may contribute to improving national frameworks, vital to the durability of the system. He also remarked that these improvements will be conditioned by the clarification of financing mechanisms, namely thanks to the support of the European Social Fund.

# PANEL 1

## DEVELOPMENT OF VALIDATION MECHANISMS: IMPLICATIONS FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Following the introduction by EU institution representatives, the first panel continued on the European level, showcasing projects implementing validation mechanisms and a posteriori, delivering suggestions to improve them.



**Mayri Tiido**  
GR-EAT PROJECT, AEGEE

Mayri Tiido, from the European students' organisation AEGEE, opened the first panel by presenting the GR-EAT project (2014-2016), which aims at establishing Guidelines for the Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) taking place in youth organisations. The final goal is to propose a European Advanced Tool which would give internal recognition systems the external visibility and functionality for volunteers to be able to use their competences acquired during their activity as meaningful skills in their search for employment. Mrs. Tiido explained how high youth unemployment, revealing the discrepancy between education and labour market needs, had influenced this project, and how existing systems were sometimes insufficient for young people to prove their competences and skills, giving the YouthPass as example. She then moved on to describe the project methodology, decomposed in a research phase and implementation of the guidelines.

### Thomas Tugulescu

SURVEY ON THE RECOGNITION OF  
VOLUNTEERS' COMPETENCES BY  
EMPLOYERS, EUCIS-LLL

Thomas Tugulescu presented the survey led by EUCIS-LLL as partner in the GR-EAT project. Despite the fact that the learning outcomes of volunteering are seldom recognised by employers, they could greatly increase an individual's chances on the labour market. In this context, EUCIS-LLL carried out research among employers from a wide range of sectors, in order to discover a trend based on their needs and expectations and on that basis, establish the most convincing argumentative for promoting non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The survey was led from February to April 2015, and gathered 131 responses, from which a number of relevant data allow to formulate recommendations. The three most rated competences and soft skills are problem solving and resilience (57.02%), a sense of initiative and pro-active attitude (55.26%), and social and civic competences (47.37%). A significant figure pointed to the fact that although respondents generally agree that competences gained during a volunteering period might be relevant, 50% adding that they allow employees to volunteer, the problem resides in the fact that applicants struggle in explaining what competences they gained. Besides, two thirds admit not implementing policies or recruitment procedures that would value such activities. Very few of them are aware of the existence of competence frameworks and recognition tools while at the same time 46% of employers expressed the need for certificates or portfolios. All in all, the survey revealed a number of mismatches. Firstly, in spite of the value given to volunteering, employers claim not having the capacity to assess the competences gained during that period, calling us to raise awareness on existing tools and think of new ones that suit their needs. Secondly, volunteers experience trouble expressing the competences and skills gained in that context, calling us to focus on helping them find the words they need to convince their future employer.

### Sharon Watson

BUILDING LEARNING SOCIETIES  
(SOLIDAR) EXPERT, WEA, UK

Sharon Watson joined the debate wearing two hats: she is both Expert for the SOLIDAR Building Learning Societies and Education initiative Co-ordinator at the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the largest voluntary sector provider of adult education in the UK. Building Learning Societies aims at developing awareness for the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes as tool to improve career perspectives and stimulate further education and training. Creating stakeholder coalitions, the project scrutinises the national state of play and steps taken towards implementation of validation policies through dialogue between decision-makers and practitioners. The recommendations Mrs Watson formulated thanks to the findings of the project call for more cooperation between stakeholders, between Member States - which also means building trust and ensuring parity among them; for awareness-raising to help learners understand the learning paths they may engage on and make skills audit available to everyone; for integrating existing validation practices as well as using the existing tools (EQF, Europass...). However, as raised by a member of the audience, since transversal competences are not an element of the EQF, and yet a fundamental learning outcome of volunteering, does the EQF not constitute a threat for the latter?

## PANEL 2

### VALIDATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL: TOOLS AND INITIATIVES THAT ARE BEING DEVELOPED



During the second panel of the policy debate, participants were invited to reflect upon the state of validation at national level, envisaging what tools are developed in Member States, how they are influenced by European legislation and guidelines, and how they may in turn have a bottom-up effect.

**Lourdes Mirón**  
CONFEDERACIÓN DE  
CENTROS JUVENILES  
DON BOSCO DE ESPAÑA

**Angel Gudiña**  
SPANISH YOUTH  
COUNCIL

FOR THE RECONOCE  
PROJECT, SPAIN

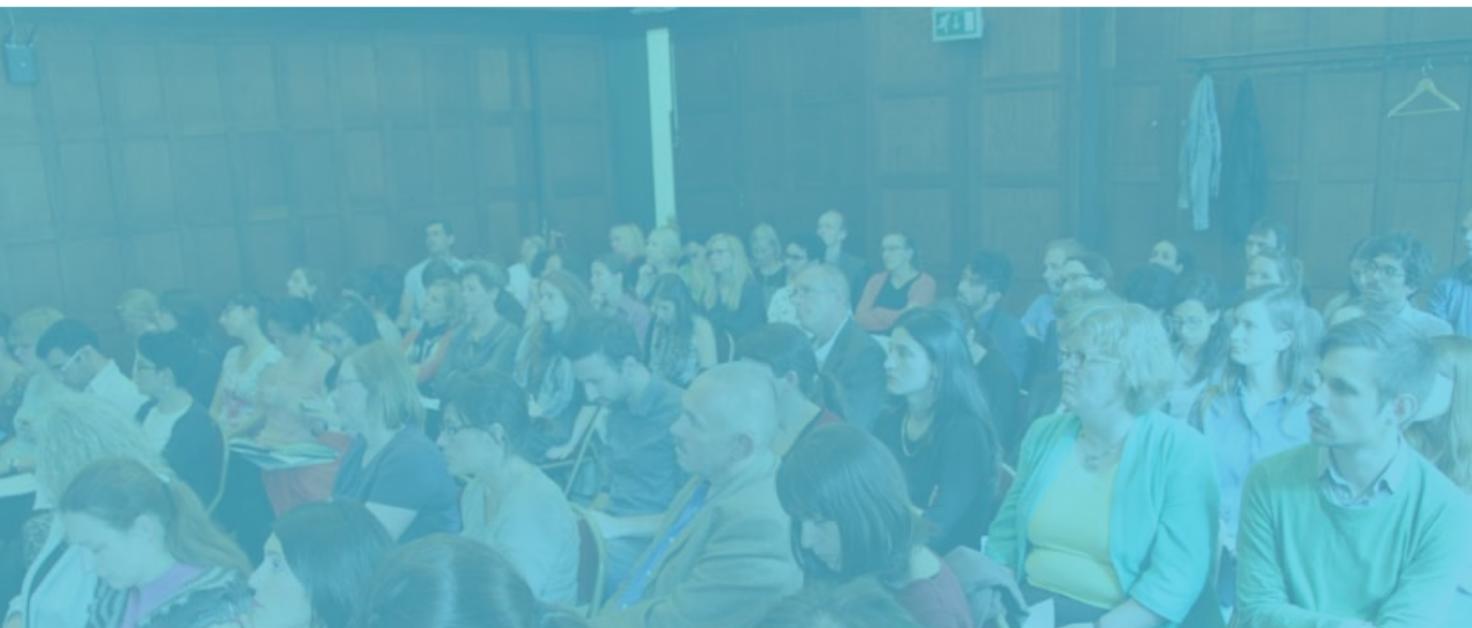
Lourdes Mirón and Angel Gudiña presented the Reconoce Project led in Spain and aimed at raising awareness in the business community and society at large on the skills gained through volunteering, present and use that experience as a way to counter the high unemployment that affects that generation (55%). The project, carried out in four parts, first found that unemployment of volunteers is 29 points below the national youth unemployment rate, namely because being active, their motivation is less likely to decrease; volunteering adds to a CV; and most of all, the skills gained through volunteering are ones sought after by employers. These competences were then developed in a catalogue, and include negotiation skills, teamwork, interpersonal communication or even flexibility. On that basis, Mrs Mirón explained how they were able to issue non formal accreditations thanks to a strong network of organisations, which in turn supported an awareness raising campaign to convince employers. The final step is to have a political impact that will allow the Reconoce Network, working in collaboration with other third sector NGOs to directly contribute to writing a roadmap for validation of competences at national level. Both Mrs Mirón and Mr Gudiña were able to affirm how positive this project was and is, as Spain has adopted a volunteering law. This is also the case for Romania.

**Ana Maria Gradinariu**  
VOLUM, ROMANIA

Ana Maria Gradinariu explained how VOLUM influenced the reform of the Volunteering Law adopted in 2001. The latter provided each volunteer be issued a document stating his or her volunteering activities and their duration, but already in 2009 there was an explicit need revision to make a more stable framework of recognition of competences. The change largely benefited from the impulse given by the European Year of Volunteering in 2011, which made the document hitherto delivered officially become a Certificate assessing volunteers' experience. It also included self-assessment. She explained that as gaps still remained, it was decided to launch a four year consultation in order to determine what modifications should be brought to the Volunteering law. And on 25 July 2014, a new law was adopted. It details the relation between volunteering and employability – a compatibility framework between the volunteering experience and the national system of qualifications; develops an instrument to correlate the volunteering experience with different types of competences and learning results, according to European documents. Mrs Gradinariu then explained how this achievement heavily rested upon the constant dialogue held with stakeholders (namely labour market representatives) and the feedback received from NGOs involved in the piloting phase, thus confirming the necessity to speak a common language in order to enhance the cooperation that leads to success.

**Dr. Eberhard Funk**  
DEUTSCHER VEREIN FÜR ÖFFENTLICHE  
UND PRIVATE FÜRSORGE, GERMANY

The presentation made by Eberhard Funk, who brought the German perspective to the table, was slightly different from all up to this point. He pointed how the country's constitutional organisation had influenced the validation process, since education is now in the hands of the Federate States (Länder), making it more difficult to synthesise the matter in a national framework, which nonetheless came into force in 2013. Dr. Funk underlined that the Non-Formal Learning specialist group rejected "employability" and "duration of qualifications" as criteria of validation of non-formal learning. Another important element that differs in Germany is that youth organisations are reluctant – and sometimes even refuse – to be involved in the qualification and validation process, which they perceive as an instrumentalisation of youth work, tarnishing the essence of volunteering. This means the process mainly goes through international youth cooperation organisations.



## CONCLUSIONS

Following a more interactive debating time, it is possible to conclude that the evolution in validation systems largely depends on the state of the labour market: in a healthy labour market with abundant working positions to fill, employers are more open to recognise skills and competences gained informally; in a less healthy labour market with high unemployment, jobseekers will be valorised if they have extra competences, gained through non-formal and informal learning, such as volunteering – if possible attested by a diploma or official certificate. Hence the importance of validation as it provides another path to access qualifications that may support low-skilled workers and unemployed youth get back to employment and/or build a career path. This is without mentioning all its potential benefits for boosting individuals' confidence and self-esteem with repercussions well beyond employment, in their personal, family and social life.

Pavel Trantina gave the first reaction to the debate, saluting the efforts made across Europe and in new Member States such as Romania. He talked about how our focus must be on helping young people and volunteers explain what competences they have gained. He also talked about bridging validation of formal education with NFIL, referring to the Maltese case, in which Secondary schools may now deliver certificates recognising all forms of learning completed in the last 5 years of education. Finally, he reminded civil society organisations it is for them to design their own qualification system and push their beliefs forward.

Koen Nomden also concluded on how crucial learning outcomes are in bridging education with the labour market. He added that validation is about visibility, and therefore, spoke of the impact assessments that must follow to testify for its important value, only way to improve employment services.

Finally, he called civil society organisation to think about the future, namely in light of the demographic change we know in Europe, when the European labour market will need to rely on third country workers, and thus, start thinking about validating skills and competences gained outside the EU.

## ABOUT EUCIS-LLL

### EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) was born in 2005 as a response from civil society organisations to the definition and implementation of a European policy in the field of education and training in the so-called «Open Method of Coordination».

In 2001 already, several educational networks had come together to share their experience and expertise and to react to the Europe-wide consultation on the EU «Lifelong Learning Memorandum». This cooperation became systematic when the Platform was established as a permanent organisation in 2005. For 10 years now, EUCIS-LLL has played a key role in structuring and increasing the input of civil society on the «Education and Training 2020» and «Europe 2020» strategies and their ancestors.

Today funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, EUCIS-LLL was acknowledged by the European Commission in 2009 as a “unique representation” of lifelong learning of the various education and training actors organised at EU level, and in 2011 as “in a unique position to support European networks in education and training to work collectively at European, national and local levels and to contribute to a structured policy dialogue within the open method of coordination in education and training”.

Gathering 36 member organisations, EUCIS-LLL is today the most legitimate interlocutor of the European institutions in the field of lifelong learning. EUCIS-LLL continuously defends the need to implement a dialogue across educational sectors and between stakeholders and public institutions at all levels, regional, national and European.

## Values

The platform fosters a vision of lifelong learning that promotes equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. It believes that the objectives of education and training should not only be described in terms of employability or economic growth but also as a framework for personal development. It is essential to raise awareness on the fact that lifelong learning should include a large range of learning settings and create more complementarity and continuity between formal, non-formal and informal learning.

## Vision

EUCIS-LLL is a tool to promote a holistic vision of lifelong learning, from cradle to grave, that is not limited to formal education but integrates non-formal and informal learning. By bringing together actors from all sectors and levels of education and training, EUCIS-LLL contributes to an increased flexibility between systems. By encouraging an exchange of knowledge, it aims to build a citizen's voice on education and training issues but also to propose concrete solutions to make lifelong learning a reality for all.

## Objectives

- ▶ Pursuing an active dialogue with European institutions
- ▶ Enabling exchanges of best practice, experiences and expertise
- ▶ Disseminating information on key issues in the lifelong learning sector
- ▶ Organising events and developing activities