

§4 Support Structures

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Access to guidance is essential for learners trying to navigate recognition procedures. A combination of face-to-face support and online tools and information form a valuable component of any functioning VPL system.

4.1 Information-provision and awareness raising of the value of people's informal and non-formal learning experiences need to be embedded in learning, career guidance and work.

Why is it important?

From a lifelong learning perspective, validation constitutes a fundamental pillar. It makes education and training pathways more flexible and provides a bridge between third sector and labour market organisations. Validation arrangements, in order to realise their full potential, need to be an integral part of the countries' infrastructure for learning and employment.

Validation cannot act in a void. It works alongside other social services in supporting individuals to fulfil their potential. Advocacy and awareness raising campaigns need to work at national, regional and local levels. Referrals from guidance services and public employment services help recruitment and prepare individuals for validation. NGOs and third sector organisations are instrumental in making validation available to disadvantaged individuals.

The integration with other services will determine the value and usefulness of validation outcomes for learning and career progression.

Where is it working well?

In the majority of countries, the institution carrying out the validation will provide the supporting guidance for validation. In several countries, Public Employment Services and other organisations cooperate or are involved in the validation process. Cité des Métiers is, for example, a space for advice and resource materials providing career advice and professional development for individuals, including referrals to validation. Currently, "Cité des Métiers" exists in nine countries: France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Canada, Chile, Mauritius and Belgium. In Finland, the competence-based qualifications are well integrated into guidance and career counselling. In the French-speaking part of Belgium, within the process of validation of competences (VDC), partnerships exist with guidance professionals from PES.

4.2 Free and accessible guidance needs to be provided before, during and after all phases of validation.

Why is it important?

Cost should not be a barrier to participation in validation, and having support is necessary, especially for the most disadvantaged. In the process of validation, the individual should be able to stop the process at any point in time, without prejudice of losing all the work already done. Individuals need support at all stages of the process. They need to be informed and take decisions on when to move from one stage to the other. They need support in translating their experiences into learning outcomes to be checked against standards. They need support in creating the evidence of learning, which is needed in order to be assessed. They need to prepare for assessment and manage expectations on the outcomes of validation.

Where is it working well?

Validation usually comes with some support structures and some guidance associated with it. In Europe, practically all countries which offer validation provide it with guidance and counselling. In many cases it is compulsory to have guidance for the candidates. In Switzerland, for example, before entering the procedure, two compulsory information events must be attended. Guidance is normally offered on an individual basis adapted to the specific needs of the individual. In France, in a similar way, the regional information points (PRC) provide guidance and counselling in an integrated manner that is personalised and free. Based on the advice given by PRCs, individuals can be oriented towards validation or other types of mechanisms.

4.3 Guidance structures need to be accessible locally and online, to ensure that geography is not a barrier to participation.

Why is it important?

Validation support should be made available in different forms and formats, through different channels. Having the possibility to have both on-line and off-line support will increase the possibilities for individuals to engage in validation. In order to reach the most disadvantaged, who can benefit most from validation, it is necessary to involve local communities and to have support available locally. At the same time, difficult to reach and less densely populated areas would benefit from having on-line access to support. In addition, different modes of delivery will better adapt to the specific individual's needs.

Where is it working well?

A combination of on-line and off-line support tools exists for validation in several countries. On-line services tend to be the first way of becoming acquainted with validation. In Denmark, a counselling web portal provides general information about validation of prior learning (www.ug.dk). In the Flemish speaking region of Belgium, the website, www.erkennenvancompetenties.be informs the public about the different opportunities for

validation. The canton of Zurich offers candidates a supporting online instrument, which navigates them through the entire procedure and can be used to list their competences. These online tools are accompanied by local support and guidance in the centres that provide the validation.

4.4 There should be one single entry point to the validation scheme, which is available both online and offline and coordinates the validation pathway of the learner.

Why is it important?

The individual needs to experience the validation process without unnecessary hurdles in the way. The different services, stages, tools, formats should be presented to him/her on a need-to-know basis, without unnecessary complications when their case does not require it. A single entry point facilitates the coordination and coherence of the system, making sure that the different phases of the process work together in a unified manner, in the best possible way to provide the individual with the best possible service.

Where is it working well?

In Portugal, the Qualifica centres are local-level structures that are embedded in a wide range of entities (i.e. public, private, profit-making organisations as well as non-governmental/civil society organisations). They offer services of guidance and validation within the framework for the recognition, validation and certification of competencies, RVCC (Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências). In relation to validation in IVET in Switzerland, adult qualification services are in charge of coordinating all the other organisations and institutions that take part in the validation procedure.

4.5 Specialist training and certification for VPL practitioners is needed to ensure respectful, confidential and competent support that empowers the learner to own the VPL process.

Why is it important?

Trust in validation largely depends on the work carried out by the practitioners and professionals directly involved with validation candidates. This can only be achieved through high quality training and professionalization of practitioners that assure the quality of the process.

Making visible the learning acquired through experience outside formal education institutions requires a deep understanding of learning and existing qualification standards, the context in which validation is taking place and the possible outcomes achievable. The counsellor has to be prepared to provide information to the individual on the process as well as prepare him/her for the assessment phase, supporting the individual in the collection of evidence and assisting them in deciding when to advance to the next phase.

In addition, practitioners are faced with a multitude of individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. It is important for them to be trained in multi-cultural understanding and other soft skills that allow them to provide adequate support.

Where is it working well?

Provision of training for validation practitioners is something that still needs to be further developed. In Europe, the main mandatory requirements for practitioners tend to refer to assessors, while there are less compulsory requirements for guidance practitioners. Training is compulsory in Belgium, where higher education associations organise in-house training and provide in-house support to validation practitioners. Training is carried out annually both for assessors and for guidance practitioners. In France and Luxembourg, there is specific training for guidance and counsellors. In Portugal, some practitioners are trying to organise themselves in order to form communities of practice and to develop sessions for reflecting upon work achieved.

4.6 In order to have fair and objective processes, in the assessment and certification phase, assessors must be independent from advisors.

Why is it important?

The credibility of the validation process depends on the neutrality of the assessor. It is important that any procedures are of high quality and credible. The process of validation is also a process of self-awareness and realisation; while delving deeper into one's experiences, emotional links might develop inevitably between the advisor and the individual. Having assessors and advisors differentiated will make it easier to have independent, more objective judgement of the learning outcomes acquired. The assessor should not be linked in any way to the individual being assessed, reducing the possibilities for bias

Separating the roles of the assessor and the advisor at the stage of assessment and certification allows also for a better distinction between formative and summative assessments. While the advisor can focus on supporting the individual and making learning a priority in the identification and documentation phases, in the assessment and certification phases the assessor can focus on evaluating learning outcomes against standards.

This differentiation also reduces the amount of time that assessors need to invest per individual and will allow for further specialization of both assessors and advisors.

At the same time, having both assessor and advisor working together will permit that fair treatment and individualisation of the procedure is assured.

Where is it working well?

Most of the countries differentiate between counsellors and assessors. They tend to have different skills profiles and qualifications. At the same time, certain amount of common understanding of validation procedure is required. In Spain, advisors cannot participate as assessors in the same call for validation; they provide advice to applicants and write a report for the evaluation committee that is not binding for the evaluation team. In the Haute Ecoles in

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francophone Belgium, counsellors are trained to accompany VAE candidates throughout the process and they sit in the jury as observers and might provide additional information in the application being examined.