innoval

Assessment Methods for Validation

Advocacy Report

For educational stakeholders and policy-makers

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The InnoVal Project and the European context for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2018

The 2012 Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) gave a strong political incentive to the goal of all the EU Member States to put in place national validation arrangements by 2018. Yet, according to the CEDEFOP 2016 Validation Inventory Report, EU countries still greatly diverge in terms of mechanisms in place and in particular in reaching out to disadvantaged groups. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of assessment procedures, and to avoid additional costs, many educational institutions prefer to use traditional tests like the ones conducted in formal education (written or oral exams). Their rigidity leads to neglecting many crucial elements of the learning process, such as the mode in which learning outcomes have been acquired (informal or non-formal vs. formal). In addition, the lack of adequate and accessible guidance structures do not facilitate the validation process of learners. InnoVal project partners believe that the **over-reliance on classical tests hinders learners' take-up of validation and represents one of the strongest obstacles to its development in Europe.**

Assessment instruments have the potential to cater to different target groups by using suitable and diverse formats (e.g. multilingual, picture- and video-based) and ideally, correspond to the learner's skill level. The use of alternative methods such as portfolios, declarative methods and simulations is on the increase but remains limited. **The InnoVal project tries to answer to this need by sharing innovative methods from 6 EU countries as well as providing a training programme on innovative assessment methods for practitioners.**

If most countries now have validation arrangements in place, the fact that they are very different can pose issues for mobility, differing quality, and outreach. There is also the question, shown in the **InnoVal needs assessment consultation and report**, that validation mechanisms are not accessible or appropriate for individuals who have had negative experiences with assessment. Furthermore, the traditional assessment methods that are important for social and professional mobility are not able to capture all types of skills and competences. (e.g. practical hands-on skills or soft skills). Many competences that can be described as less academic and more transversal (communication, problem-solving, teamwork, etc.) are not taken into consideration by traditional forms of assessment. The integration of individuals into society and the economy is at stake when their competences acquired outside formal settings cannot be recognised and validated. Therefore, **a full implementation of the above-mentioned Council Recommendation requires comprehensive strategies and frameworks which encompass new ways of assessing one's competences in order to be fully effective and inclusive. This report includes recommendations for practitioners as well as for policy-makers that aim to improve validation systems and to build inclusive learning societies.**

What is InnoVal?

Start date: October 2016
End date: September 2018

Cofunding: Erasmus+ Key Action 2, "Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices" and funded under "Strategic Partnerships for vocational education and training"

Project website: inno-val.eu

I. The InnoVal project

«The validation process must take into account that each individual is unique. That may challenge the level of standardisation»

InnoVal, which stands for 'Innovative Assessment Methods for Validation', is a two-year Erasmus+ project (2016-2018) co-funded under Key Action 2 "Strategic partnerships". The project partnership covers seven countries (Belgium, France, Finland, Greece, Portugal and Germany). Innoval aims to address the urgent need to offer valid and reliable assessment methods that allow all individuals to have a chance at validation with a special focus on disadvantaged groups such as migrants, the long-term unemployed, individuals with disabilities, early school leavers, and those who have had an adverse experience with formal education, including with standard school-based assessments.

Innovative assessment methods for validation of non-formal and informal learning

Validation systems often target adults who have had an adverse experience with formal education and formal assessment methods. This may lead them to leave school before completing their secondary education and/or to low participation in further formal education. Yet, they have acquired many skills and competences in non-formal and informal learning environments that they would have validated if the assessment method did not bring them back to their previous negative experience with formal education (cf InnoVal's needs assessment reports). Other possible explanations are that they are unaware of the option for VNFIL, that they do not speak, read or write the language of the assessment, that they have a disability that requires additional support, that the content of the assessment itself requires academic skills (e.g. to make calculations) that they do not know or have. **InnoVal aims to foster a change in practices related to the assessment of non-formal and informal learning across Europe and across sectors.** InnoVal is meant to be innovative as it brings together Vocational Training providers and Higher Education stakeholders who are advanced either in the use of innovative assessment methods, in building links with the labour market and/or in dealing with disadvantaged groups; as well as research bodies who can provide the evidence with an EU perspective and European networks which can ensure policy impact and broad dissemination and exploitation of results.

Project results

The research conducted by the partners led to the collection of more than 20 videos of innovative assessment practitioners and more than 50 case studies coming from 6 EU countries (Belgium, France, Finland, Greece, Germany and Portugal). They are freely available on the **Online Training Platform** and the **Youtube channel**. These materials are all integrated into a training programme composed of 4 modules. The **Toolbox** also contains other useful resources and exercises for practitioners and relevant links to institutions working on VNFIL. Each project partner has identified the most innovative best practices from their country. The flashcards below provide an overview of these innovative cases. The present report is the final project deliverable and the main instrument for the advocacy campaign that the Lifelong Learning Platform is leading together with the support of the other partners.

Transferability and upscaling of results

The InnoVal project's ultimate aim, in addition to identifying and promoting innovative assessment methods, is to look at the potential for transferability of the collected methods. This is why the project partners engaged with the various target groups (Ministries in charge of Validation, EU, NQF Agencies, EU networks, etc.) in various contexts (such as Peer Learning Activities, roundtables, conferences, working groups etc.) from the start of the project, so as to ensure a broad impact. This forms a sound basis for investigating possibilities for upscaling and building cost-efficient business models for the replication of methods whenever relevant.

II. Flashcards
Best practices of assessment methods in Europe

The Flashcards aim at highlighting the applied use of best practices as examples of successful innovative methods for validation. They were selected by each partner of the project out of the ones they had collected during the project lifespan. **See more here**.

FlashCard #1

School Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RCVCC)

In a nutshell

What is it? RCVCC gives basic or secondary education qualification and assess transversal skills based on the Key Competence Framework.
Sectors: Adult education, general education
Target groups: Early school leavers, adult learners
Method: Portfolio

Method

Developed by Qualifica Centres[1], the School RVCC process aims at improving the levels of school certification of adults aged 18 and older, employed or unemployed, generally early school leavers who did not have the opportunity to complete basic or secondary education. Through the development of specific activities, learners build a portfolio with biographical and curricular documents, evidencing competences to be validated upon a reference framework based on the Key **Competence Framework** developed by the European Commision. Therefore, it also assesses adults' skills according to transversal competence areas (e.g. Citizenship and Employability, Language and Communication, Mathematics for Life and Information and Communication Technologies) and is flexible, allowing a plurality of skills combination. The School RVCC process has three axis: recognition, validation and certification. It gives the adult a basic level or secondary level certification. The School RVCC process uses the 'skills balance methodology' that values the potential held by the person and contributes to the construction of personal, educational and professional projects.

Success

The school RVCC process encourages lifelong learning, enables the completion of basic and secondary education, helps learners to obtain higher qualification levels, and promotes their self-esteem, self-confidence and autonomy. When they have completed the secondary education certificate through School RVCC process, learners are eligible to apply to higher education courses. It is an interesting case because by using a holistic approach to measuring achieved learning outcomes with the portfolio methods, it allows participants to show what they know and can do in a specific context.

[1] Structures of the Portuguese National Qualifications System inserted in public schools, VET schools or other entities and organisations.

Transferability

Transferability is possible because the Key Competence Framework is based on specific areas supposedly issued in many countries, and the skills balance methodology used in this process is applicable in other realities for being a device to support individuals in becoming aware of their "portfolio of skills" whether they have been acquired through life or work experience. However, the Key competence framework vary a great deal from country to country and therefore the replicability potential is not guaranteed in other countries. But the Portuguese reference framework can at least serve as a model for comparison and inspiration in other contexts, and to other national qualification frameworks and sectoral certification bodies with similar intended learning outcomes.

Requirements

To develop this process, the above mentioned entities need teams composed of: a coordinator, guidance counsellors with technical capacities in the recognition and validation of competences, trainers and teachers from different key competence areas and from different education and training sub-sectors.

More information: **https://www.iefp.pt/rvcc**

FlashCard #2

EDGE Project - Enhancing the Delivery of Guidance for Employability and Open Badges: assessing and validating soft and hard skills through the digital community

In a nutshell

What is it? The Open badges method can assess and certify any kind of skills (transversal and vocational) while recognising informal and non-formal learning.
Sectors: Adult education, non-formal education
Target group: All learners
Method: E-assessment tool

Method

Open Badges, in the context of the EDGE project (http://edgeproject.eu/), are e-tools (using the Mozilla open-source platform) that can be used to accredit learner achievement in the area of core skills acquisition, as well as a way of recognising informal and non-formal learning. Learners have to be registered at an educational organisation that offers this type of certification. Then, they use the corresponding e-learning platform and after completing a series of tasks and providing adequate evidence to the assessor, they will be awarded the respective badge. Each Open Badge is accompanied by an image and information about the badge, its recipient, the assessor, and any supporting evidence.

Success

Open badges have the advantage of being task-specific rather than validating a whole set of skills, which makes them ideal for recognising smaller accomplishments, thus improving learners' motivation. The students piloting the badges believe that «*the Open badges are an ideal way to show skills and can help improve a person's curriculum vitae and job opportunities, as they are both nationally and internationally recognised, while also providing adequate evidence of learning*».

HANDLING STRESS AT WORK   GOOD LISTENER   CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

downloadable 60 cards display skills and interests with culture-fair visual and translations in eight different languages on the frontside for the client. Simple descriptions, useful questions and references on the backside support the counsellor. Due to their modular nature they can be used in multiple ways from 15-minutes short skills screenings to complete documentation in 90 minutes, as illustrated in the instruction video. This resource-based approach helps to document social, personal, and transversal skills. By empowering immigrants and disadvantaged learners to communicate their strengths, the Competence Cards help improve their educational and professional situation.

Transferability

As a tool open badges are intended to be transferable. Each organisation has to have certified educational programmes in order to create a valid assessment procedure that can be implemented digitally without excessive requirements that burden the learners. Through the "Handbook for Practitioners" developed in the EDGE Project, practitioners and assessors are able to develop and issue their own open badges in whichever field and subject they wish.

Requirements

As we can see from the above mentioned, each EDGE Open Badge can be considered as a dual-purpose tool. The most direct asset of the tool is that the assessee only needs to have basic ICT skills that enable access to the descriptions of how the Open Badge may be acquired. The EDGE project includes a "Handbook for Practitioners" as part of its final Report. Tutors have a step-by-step guide on how to create and issue personalised open badges.

More information: https://edgeproject.eu

FlashCard #3

Competence Cards help making social, personal, and transversal method skills transparent in migrants and disadvantaged learners

In a nutshell

What is it? The 'card game' method allows counsellors to do short and complete skills screenings as a way to assess disadvantaged learners' potential and improve their educational and professional situation.
Sectors: General Education, VET, Higher Education, Adult Education, Youth, Work
Target groups: Migrants and disadvantaged learners in general
Method: Offline tool

Success

A survey of migrant counsellors and experts showed that there were no standardised instruments for determining the potential of immigrants. Furthermore, many of the existing procedures were not entirely suitable: they were often "language-heavy" and therefore difficult for immigrants to understand and could not be applied on an intercultural basis. The Competence Cards are customised to both the immigrants' and the counsellors' needs. They are flexible, practically-oriented, allow to visualise competences and are compatible with other counselling services, e.g. the work of the public employment agencies and job centres. They are flexible with respect to interests and needs of the target person, with regard to their available time and they allow for a flexible selection of the competence areas and terms. The competence cards can be completed in a short amount of time, are self-explanatory and easy-to-use, regardless of the learner's language skills in English.

Method

In cooperation with various partners[2], the foundation Bertelsmann **BertelsmannStiftung** Stiftung has developed Competence Cards for employment, education and immigration counselling in order to speed up the recognition and use of the skills and prior experiences of migrants and disadvantaged learners. The freely

Transferability

The Competence Cards are licensed under Creative Commons ('CC BY SA 4.0'). This way they can be easily adapted to the needs of the respective counselling context. The open license promotes further user-driven dissemination and improvements. This also means that in any other country these cards can be translated and used.

[2] Forschungsinstitut Betriebliche Bildung GmbH, the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege and the Bund der Vertriebenen.

Requirements

The card set that is needed for the implementation of the assessment can be downloaded for free (see link below). A printout version in German can be ordered from the same website. Client and counsellor need a table to distribute the cards according to the three competence levels +, ++, and +++. The documentation template should be printed out. The instruction video and the 2-page manual usually are sufficient in order to start using the cards in guidance and validation practice. The clients should have language skills at level A2 or B1 for the cards to be most effective and A2/B1 in in English or German for the counsellors to use the cards. The competence definitions are translated into eight languages: German, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Farsi, Turkish and Tigrinya, so will soon be as well the counsellor's instructions in the backside of the card. More than 10.000 sets have already been distributed and over 3.000 downloaded!

More information: https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/competence-cards

FlashCard #4

Testing vocational skills with MySkills

In a nutshell

What is it? MySkills is a multimedia tool (video and pictures) that is used to assess vocational skills through an objective, standardized, and reliable test.
Sectors: VET, Work
Target group: Vocational learners
Method: Computer test

Method

MYSKILLS, developed by Bertelsmann Stiftung for the German Federal Employment Agency, is a digital video- and picture-based assessment tool for vocational skills in VET-professions,

MYSKILLS
BERUFLICHE KOMPETENZEN ERKENNEN

from elder care assistant to skilled metalworker. For each profession the test consists of 120 items and takes approximately four hours. The exercises follow a standardised model: the participants see videos and images of typical occupational situations and are then asked procedural questions. They are supposed to, for instance, put the work steps in the right order, identify errors in the illustrated situations, or answer technical questions about the work equipment or occupational safety. The test results document how well they do in the respective occupational field of application so it becomes clear in which areas a participant actually possesses relevant skills. They can prove which typical job situations they are familiar with and whether they know exactly what to do in these situations. The result of the test reveals for each profession how competent a client is in the 4-7 occupational fields of application.

Success

MYSKILLS is used in all 156 German Public Employment Service sites that have a test centre and is expected to serve 100.000 clients per year once all 30 professions (currently 8) are available. Clients can take the test in any of six languages: German, English, Arabic, Farsi, Russian, and Turkish. MYSKILLS permits people without a professional qualification to have their vocational skills assessed through an objective, standardized, and reliable test that has been developed and reviewed repeatedly by vocational experts, statisticians and psychologists. Due to its modular approach - based on the occupational fields of application instead of full professions - the test result helps job centre and employment agency counsellors find a suitable job opening, internship or further training offer for the client. Some companies have already signalled their interest in using the test results as a personal development tool for their employees, so they can see where they stand, which training is still needed, who could be promoted, etc.

Transferability

MYSKILLS is an ICT-based instrument that covers multiple languages and professions. Further translations or additional professions can be added at reasonable costs. Also additional target groups could be reached, like employees who have not worked much in their initial VET profession and want to return to it. In principal, MYSKILLS could also support awarding bodies in a German validation system, once this is set up. The test results do not replace formal occupational qualifications, however. As tests of occupational action knowledge, they do not substitute the assessment of practical skills.

Requirements

On behalf of job placement agents, trained psychologists administer MYSKILLS in the 156 test centres of the German employment agencies. There, computers with mouse and high-speed internet connectivity are required. It is crucial that clients do not bring any audio, video or other recording devices to the test session in order to protect the test items.

More information: https://www.myskills.de/en

FlashCard #5

The portrait methodology

In a nutshell

What is it? The Portrait methodology is a formative evaluation tool that allow higher education teachers to evaluate their students' practical skills as teachers and coach them in improving them.
Sector: Higher education
Target groups: Students, teachers
Methods: Self-portrait evaluation and observation

Method

This method was developed by Ilse Geerinck and Sabine Dierick, lecturers and researchers from University Colleges Leuven-Limburg in Belgium. It is a formative evaluation tool for pre-service teachers or student-teachers in Higher Education. It assesses the students' experience of teaching and the way the student gives form to the idea of teaching. Portraits (see below) are used both for coaching and for assessment purposes of learners. The portrait aims to create an image of a learner that provides information on what the learner needs in order to grow. In other words, a portrait is an attempt to pull out or portray the teacher standing by focusing on his/her ethos (the way he or she relates to him/herself, the other and the world). That way, it draws its 'practical skills': his/her style, behaviour, mannerism and concerns. Current assessment practices often make an evaluation on the acquired competences at the end of the learning experience, which is too late for remedial actions. The portrait is being created from the beginning of the year and is a tool for giving feedback during the year.

Success

The portrait method is not the same as observing a learner according to a so-called 'objective formal criteria'. The purpose is to get more in-depth insight on the interaction of the learner with others and on its vision, beliefs and personal drivers. These insights are describing in an empathic and concrete way what the assessor sees and why a learner (re-)acts in a certain way. Hereby, the assessor also takes into account the expression of the learner, the body language, the effect of his/her behaviour.

Johannes Grumpp
Self-portrait

Transferability

Currently, the tool is used in a higher education institution, but it is particularly useful for people in a vulnerable context since it provides a complete "holistic" view on the learner's knowledge and competences as it is not based on one assessment at a fixed point in time. It can be transferred to other learners, especially for assessing practical skills, but the researchers believe it can also be applied for assessing skills acquired in a more theoretical context.

Requirements

Two fundamental conditions are required in order to be able to make a portrait. First of all, the preparation and guidance of teachers: the facilitator should explain the process and attitudes clearly to the students before starting the reflective activity (e.g. appreciative attitude vs judging attitude, empathy). Secondly, time is needed to observe, exchange, consider and deliberate to create the narrative: this is a methodology that takes several sessions to be really effective, sometimes months.

More information: Geerinck, I. (2011). The Teacher as a Public Figure. Three Portraits. Doctoral Dissertation, KU Leuven

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FlashCard #6

Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE) - A Course for Migrants, an Asset for Work
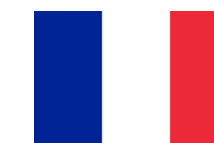
Key words

What is it? Thanks to the VAE project, migrants can see their vocational skills and knowledge recognised and get a qualification to facilitate their access to the labour market.
Sectors: VET, Work
Target group(s): Migrants
Method(s): Guidance, training and Portfolio

Method

The project "VAE – A Course for Migrants, An Asset for Work" targets migrants in legal situation living in 'priority neighbourhoods' in Lyon (France) and is intended to facilitate their access to the labour market. The validation process leads to a professional certification. Three partners run together the project: Temps d'Agir, a company that works at local level; The Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Certifiers Platform, the regional public body for certification; and DAVA[3] of the Academy of Lyon, which is a certifying body in the region and is the project leader. The project helps migrant participants to gain professional experience in order to achieve recognised certificates necessary for certain jobs. The first step is to recruit and provide guidance to the candidates, through the organisation of information meetings for job seekers at Employment Centres and local associations. The next step is to assist the motivated candidates in identifying their professional goals. Programme counsellors and assessors work one-on-one with participants. In addition, participants exchange and help one another through support groups. This process involves helping the candidates in the choice of qualification (according to their professional goal) and providing support to complete the first and second validation booklets, which are used in different phases of the validation process. In the final step, there is a recognition process undertaken by ENIC-NARIC[4], the French Information centre for the academic and professional recognition of qualifications.

Success

It improves the conditions for the access to work and professional training via the certification of migrants, capitalising on their experience in their countries of origin. It downplays the perception of validation pathways as long and complex. The project helps people to gain experience professionally in order to then move forward with a recognised level of certification. It recognises the contributions of an intercultural experience in the field of professional competences and helps candidates contextualise their experiences abroad within the expected French professional situation.

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[3] The acronym 'DAVA' (Dispositif Académique de Validation des Acquis) is also referring to the methodology used to recognise competences acquired in non-formal and informal context.
[4] European Network of Information Centres in the European Region - National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union

Transferability

As DAVA is implemented in the context of each regional academy across France, it has been possible to transfer this project at national level. Candidates participating in this project have adapted well to society and shown endurance and willingness to face integration-related challenges, as they understand what they are capable of. Challenges have included insufficient level of the French language (understanding and expression), particularly for several women candidates, and experience of socio-professional downgrade between their original qualification in the home country and the job offer available to them in France.

Requirements

The VAE is linked to the national reference framework for validation of acquired experiences. Tools and counseling methods are adapted to the needs of the migrant participants. Counsellors are trained in the availability of resources and jobs, the use of the tools, and on methods for working with the participants individually and in the support group.

More information: www1.ac-lyon.fr/greta/dava
www.francevae.fr

From the flashcards...

These flashcards have been selected by the project partners because they show good levels of innovativeness and/or are particularly successful in their own context and with the selected target groups. These examples show alternative methods that can overcome the most common barriers that disadvantaged learners encompass in their lives and their educational and professional pathways.

Based on their models, the InnoVal project partners have identified and formulated recommendations addressed to practitioners and policy-makers. These recommendations aim to highlight the benefits of alternative assessment methods for validation and encourage all related stakeholders to develop and promote them for building more inclusive societies overall.[5]

...to the recommendations

III. Recommendations for practitioners

1. Adapt assessment methods to the needs of the target group

The use of more innovative and adapted assessment tools and methods can help to ensure that more adults participate in lifelong learning and this can be particularly relevant when it comes to non-traditional learners - such as migrants, refugees, individuals with low qualifications, disabilities and other disadvantaged groups. Some of these learners might have previously had difficulties accessing and going through formal education. Thus, **assessment methods need to be adapted to the characteristics and needs of the target groups** if we want validation processes to be useful for these learners. This means the choice of methods should take into account any literacy challenges, disabilities, language and cultural barriers or other needs. Migrant learners may also need more targeted and tailored support in order to make informed judgments about the relevance of their prior experiences, as well as for navigating new and very different systems.

2. Adopt alternative assessment methods to ensure non-traditional learners benefit from validation

While traditional validation assessment can be inappropriate for non-traditional learners due to the barriers they face, alternative assessment methods can better respond to the specific needs of disadvantaged categories of learners. "Innovative methods of assessment" are for instance portfolios, self- and peer- assessment and simulations, project work, interviews, biographical methods, digital assessment, etc. "as opposed to traditional multiple choice tests and essay writing" (Cedefop, ICF International, 2014).

It is important to specify that the innovativeness of an assessment method can be often context-related: a method not considered innovative in a given context may represent a novelty in a different context. Furthermore, new assessment forms are sometimes already available but not always properly disseminated. Non-traditional learners will benefit if assessments are more widely accessible on demand and not only during strictly defined periods. Moreover, the possibility to have a second opportunity of trying again the assessment for free that leads to certification of skills and knowledge, in case of a setback[5], should be considered.

3. Choose alternative assessment methods that are reliable, valid and usable

When implementing alternative validation methods, the lack of acceptance by both educational institutions and employers pose a big problem. To overcome this issue, it is essential to use only alternative methods that are reliable, valid and usable.

Reliability means that the results of the assessment are consistent and stable across populations. This ensures that certificates, no matter where they are issued, will have equal value for employers and/or educational institutions.

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[5] It is maybe worth considering that in a VNFIL process closely monitored by an advisor this should not be needed. The advisor should know when a candidate is ready and not force him/her to go through the evaluation face until this is the case.

Validity refers to the degree to which the assessment measures what it is intended to measure and therefore their ability to gather the appropriate evidence.

Usability means that assessment methods should also be easy to administer and to interpret. When used formatively, the results should point to next steps for career development and/or academic work. When used summatively, the assessment should be clearly aligned with learning outcomes and standards, to ensure transparency of qualifications.

4. Make use of a mix of standardised and non-standardised assessment methods

The standardisation of assessment methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning is still considered essential to ensure the validity and reliability of the results, as confirmed by the online consultation held by InnoVal (2017). For many providers, the advantages of standardised assessment appear to outweigh the disadvantages. However, while standardisation is important for issues such as mobility in the labour market (so that everyone is assessed by the same methods) and for educational institutions, assessment should always be fit for purpose. It is also true that standardised approaches cannot capture all aspects of competences. Different assessment methods provide different ways of measuring competences and **a mix of standardised and non-standardised methods could be the solution**. In fact, mixed approaches, which bring together standardised and non-standardised elements, are increasingly used (Souto-Otero and Villalba-García, 2014).

5. Foster knowledge and understanding of VNFIL and innovative assessment methods

The lack of acceptance by educational institutions of the added value of validation of non-formal and informal learning and of the outcomes of alternative assessment methods represents an important barrier to using innovative methods for validation. It is essential that **education institutions and practitioners recognise the value of non-formal and informal learning and engage in promoting the knowledge and understanding of innovative assessment methods for validation**. This will generate a more positive perception of these methods and the acceptance of the outcomes generated through them. Education institutions should also dedicate efforts to explaining and communicating how validation can be important for people, from the social and economic point of view.

6. Involve employers and other relevant stakeholders in the VNFIL process

Some companies, mostly big companies, are very much involved in VNFIL whereas small and medium-sized companies lag behind. It also varies depending on the professional field (if high demand or low demand of labour force), skills shortage, and the type of skills that are assessed. Employers focus more on technical and vocational skills than transversal skills, which are harder to evaluate. The heterogenous lack of acceptance by labour market stakeholders of the results of validation processes should be seriously addressed by giving preference to **assessment methods that meet the requirements and criteria needed by employers and the job market.** They can benefit from getting a better understanding of the full range of skills and competences of current and future employees, including those earned through recognition of informal and non-formal experiences.

Educational institutions should strengthen the outreach to and cooperation with employers and the job market, to make sure that the skills validated are those needed on the labour market and that the assessment methods used are likely to be recognised and accepted outside the educational institutions. As already stressed in the OBSERVAL-Net Manifesto (Eucen, 2013), 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, and civil society organisations, should all be actively engaged in defining and developing the validation process.

7. Improve guidance and support to learners in their educational and vocational choices and pathways

Learners too often lack information about job profiles, job-related tasks, skills requirements and orientation on new labour market trends. It is essential that education institutions, validators and assessors make the necessary efforts to **offer candidates better career guidance**. In general, the validation process with innovative assessment methods goes beyond the 4 phases described in the Council Recommendation VNFIL 2012 (identification, documentation, assessment and certification). Because they have a formative approach rather than a summative approach, these methods often incorporate some self- and social assessment which recognises the importance of dialogue between the assessor and assessees, as well as reflection before, during and after the 4 phases of formal validation process. The results of this is to provide feedback on the learning process, identify its strengths and weaknesses and provide a basis for personal or organisational improvement. In other words, it allows the validation practitioner to better counsel the learner on options to further develop competences or on employment opportunities.

8. Promote the delivery of tangible recognition, such as certification, to motivate learners to undertake validation

Validation procedures may prove to be challenging and ambitious, especially for non-traditional learners who may have had previous negative experiences with formal education and assessment, who do not speak the language of assessment fluently, or who have a disability. The **motivation for obtaining a certification can encourage candidates to overcome these different barriers.** Therefore, it is fundamental that a certification is awarded at the conclusion of the assessment procedure confirming the outcomes achieved.

9. Professionalise and train the validation professionals

Assessors, counsellors, jury members and other staff directly involved in validation play a vital role in the VNFIL process. As highlighted by the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, the need to develop the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors is crucial. Therefore, adequate and continuous training should be provided to professionals who deal with validation processes for them to be trained to:
- Develop a shared understanding of standards and scoring criteria
- Treat the candidate with openness, empathy and respect
- Support learners' self-awareness and self-confidence
- Provide complete information and counselling
- Use assessments that are appropriate for candidates' needs and that can help yield maximum information on each candidates' competences
- Develop an appropriate mix of standardised and alternative assessments
- Counsel the candidate on options to further develop competences or on employment opportunities
- Ensure transparency of the process

10. Learn from successful practices and existing resources

Many efforts have been made in recent years to foster the implementation of validation procedures and practices. The InnoVal project has added to these efforts by reviewing existing innovative assessment methods and assessing the needs of the disadvantaged target groups and by developing a valuable and comprehensive "Innovative Methods Toolbox" which collects and analyses relevant case studies. In addition to this, a Training Programme was prepared. All these resources have been integrated and are freely accessible on the InnoVal Online Learning Platform. Education practitioners in general and validation professionals in particular are invited to take advantage of these existing resources and consider their adoption for the implementation of more effective assessment methods of validation.

IV. Recommendations for policy-makers

1. Adopt a common definition and understanding of validation processes to facilitate policy learning between EU Member States, taking local contexts into consideration

While the Council Recommendation provides a useful blueprint to understand what validation means in the context of the recognition of competencies and skills acquired in NFIL formats, the main challenge is that there is still no harmonised concept at the European level (cf CEDEFOP reports). The main challenge is to agree on what is quality and on the different ways of measuring it. Some countries are still in the process of defining the learning outcomes as regards to formal learning and are far from adopting common standards for learning taking place in non-formal and informal learning settings. A shared understanding on assessment methods for VNFIL must apply to many quality principles such as validity, reliability, transparency, trustworthiness, dependability, confirmability, transferability and (cost) efficiency. Such principles are key to build trust between different stakeholders concerned by assessment and validation.

The benefits would be to facilitate the exchange of practices between Member States and enhance the transferability potential of the methods used by the practitioners in peer learning activities. **EU policy-makers should encourage Member States to work on a common definition and develop shared understanding regarding their different approaches to validation and assessment.**

2. Raise awareness within the formal education sector about the benefits of VNFIL by building more bridges with non-state actors

All learning irrespective of where and when it takes place matters, but while not all learning calls for certification or validation, recognition is always very valuable for the individuals and society as a whole in terms of employability, personal development (confidence), and access to further education and trainings. Non-state actors (civil society organisations, social partners i.e employers and trade unions or private education and training providers) sometimes develop their own validation process but it is not recognised by formal education institutions and/or other non-formal providers. They could play a bigger role in helping practitioners of traditional validation processes to develop new forms of assessment methods that allow the recognition of the skills acquired in non-formal (and informal) settings.

In some countries (e.g. Germany), validation is criticised by formal education authorities (universities in higher education and chambers in vocational education). They fear that their role as the gate-keepers to formal degrees might be jeopardised. The real question is not where validation takes place but how to bridge the worlds of informal, non-formal and formal learning. It is not always possible to use standardised and/or classical assessment methods to validate the skills acquired in NFE and informal settings. Although the validation of learning taking place in the NFIL sector is the purpose of the 2012 Council Recommendation, the setting-up of validation systems and mechanisms has only mostly been progressing in the formal education sector or without the formal education sector. **The first step is therefore to acknowledge that all learning when relevant can be recognised wherever it takes place. The second step is to ensure that the use of quality-assured procedures and outcomes during the validation process is guaranteed, which is a condition for the uptake and value of the resulting certificates on the labour market and in non-formal and informal sectors.**

3. Involve civil society organisations to reach out to disadvantaged learners

Most assessment methods used in the process of validation are expected to "fit-for-all" and do not generally take specific needs of learners into consideration, notably the disadvantaged ones. At EU level, competences recognition and validation have proved to be one of the drivers of upskilling and re-skilling pathways. Building inclusive societies for disadvantaged learners is one of the key policy objectives of EU institutions. Learners that often had an adverse experience with formal education, school-based assessments, often have difficulties integrating into society and that can be partly explained because different stakeholders in the education and labour sectors do not recognise their past work experience. Most of the time those learners are not even aware of the validation systems, their rights, and the possibilities that validation could offer to them.

Civil society organisations are very often in the best position to reach out to such target groups: they work for the social inclusion of those groups, they know how to reach them and they can be the space where the learning processes of these groups take place (e.g. language courses, support for integrating in the country, legal advice). Their work with individuals who are unemployed, at risk of unemployment, migrants and other disadvantaged individuals place them in a position of strategic importance in the validation process. In several countries, non-state actors are already responsible for carrying out validation processes resulting in, for example, certificates for learning acquired through volunteering, or personal competence portfolios, yet it is limited in scale. **Therefore, policy-makers should allow a more significant involvement of civil society organisations to play a role in assessing and validating competences of disadvantaged learners.**

4. Promote the benefits of innovative methods while carefully evaluating their cost

The benefits of validation are increasingly understood and acknowledged but the human and financial cost for using innovative and more personalised methods in certain contexts is often considered as a barrier for their use by stakeholders. Such methods often require modular, multilingual and visualised instruments and strong counselling and guidance support for the learners who are undertaking them. This ends up with costs of innovative methods being often superior to the costs of traditional and standardised assessments methods, but what about the cost to the society and the economy of individuals whose skills remain invisible and unused? **There is a need to raise stakeholders' and target groups' awareness about the benefits of alternative assessment methods, and in particular for disadvantaged learners, to stop only considering the costs and start putting first the benefits.**

5. Enhance guidance competences of practitioners on alternative assessment methods

"Practitioners" here refer to all those involved in assessment and validation activities: teachers, educators, certifiers, etc. As soon as they notice that traditional or standardised assessment methods do not work on specific individuals or target groups, they should have the capacity to direct them towards other structures using different methodologies. Such guidance knowledge must be integrated into the initial and continuous training of the practitioners. **Well-trained assessors are indeed needed, which is why policy-makers should increase support and build VNFIL practitioners' capacity during their initial and continuing education, including by developing new skills and competences (e.g. soft skills) to facilitate their understanding of the new methods.**

6. Promote innovative assessment methods as a way to improve the recognition of prior learning in formal education

According to a recent study among national students' unions in the EU (Bologna with students' eyes, 2018), recognition of prior learning (RPL) is still absent from 40% of the Higher Education systems (Bologna with Students' Eyes, 2018). The lack of trust in the validation of qualifications is given as the first barrier to RPL. This situation not only apply to higher education but to the whole formal education sector (VET, school, etc.). The acquisition of prior learning can take place in formal education as well as in non-formal and informal education. In this respect, it is important that the formal education institutions recognise certificates issued by non-state organisations. In order to do so, the certificate needs to show the learning outcomes acquired in relation to existing standards. The process requires a certain level of common language between the different sectors and an understanding of the usefulness of the certificate.

This can only be achieved through a coordinating effort of government organisations, education and training providers, non-formal learning providers, other third-sector organisations and the social partners (employers and trade unions), in addition to the existence of a clear and agreed understanding from all parties of the process and methodologies associated with validation. **Recognition of prior learning should therefore be included in national strategies which deal with formal education in order to promote at all levels (national, institutional) an understanding of RPL as complementary to formal education.**

8. Build an integrated national and/or regional strategy including non-traditional assessment methods in all sectors of education (formal, non-formal and informal)

There is still a fragmentation of the tools used by non-state actors in structuring the validation. In many cases, their activities are not linked to government-led validation strategies and they are rarely connected to formal education or to the National Qualification Frameworks (NQF). While there might be reasons to have separate developments in validation depending on the aims and objectives of the validation process and the target groups and actors involved, coordination across sectors (formal, non-formal and informal) and between actors is an important element of creating better functioning, more individual-centred validation arrangements that are suitable for increasing access to jobs and further learning opportunities and for employed workers looking for up- or re-skilling. **Policy-makers should introduce and develop an integrated national and/or regional strategy that encompass the wide scope of stakeholders, tools and methodologies used to assess competences.**

9. EU expert working groups and programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Social Fund (ESF) should continue to provide opportunities to advance the setting up of innovative national validation systems

Many Erasmus+ projects focus on validation and create innovative tools to assess competences, but due to the decentralisation and insufficient circulation of information between the programme's national agencies, many projects overlap and miss the opportunity to build synergies. **It is crucial that the outcomes of EU-funded projects are better disseminated and valorised, which depends on more available funding for these tasks** (in particular in KA2 Strategic Partnerships). As regards the European Social Fund, **there could also be a stronger link between validation and youth employment initiatives and Member States are very much encouraged to incorporate validation into their Youth Guarantee implementation plans.**

At EU level, the work done by the EQF Advisory Group could integrate more discussions and presentations regarding the benefits of using innovative assessment methods for validation. The group has already suggested some improvements on the implementation roadmap by dividing countries into three groups with different timelines and speeds according to their situation as regards validation. Peer-learning activities based on the experience of countries would speed up the whole process. We encourage policy-makers to take note of those recommendations and pursue their work in mainstreaming the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Conclusions

The purpose of this policy paper can be summarised in one key recommendation: **to develop, implement, disseminate and upscale innovative assessment methods for validation, and in particular for learners with a disadvantaged background**. **The ultimate aim is to disseminate and upscale the use of the case studies highlighted above in order to reach out to more beneficiaries**. Most alternative methods have a high transferability potential and therefore can be adopted by other types of organisations from different sectors or countries and extended to other target groups.

The InnoVal project can in a way be seen as a needs assessment and as a first step for going further in understanding, mapping and promoting the benefits of innovative assessment methods for disadvantaged target groups. The next step will be to **measure the cost and benefits of such methods and establish different viable "business models"**.

InnoVal publications

http://inno-val.eu/reports/

- InnoVal Online Consultation Analysis, by Eucen
- Mapping the Needs of InnoVal Target Groups: The Individuals Perspective, by Dafni Kek
- InnoVal Needs Assessment, by Eiesp
- **InnoVal Policy Report, by Eucen and LLLP**

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