VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN ICELAND

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is based on the idea that learning does not only take place inside the formal school system but in all kinds of situations and in all kinds of contexts. All learning is seen as valuable and should therefore be documented, irrespective of where it was acquired. In the last few years the concept of validation of real skills and competence has attracted increasing attention in Europe. The reasons are among others social, for example the importance of human resources in society, the possibility of increasing economic growth through raising the level of education, the increase in equal opportunities and of parity of opportunity to participate in the knowledge community.

With validation of non-formal and informal learning, opportunities for adults on the labour market to achieve education and training to further increase their competences are enhanced. The biggest gain for the individual is to get new possibilities to strengthen his/her education and work status. By receiving recognition for competence the individual can continue his/her education based on his/her competence level at any given moment, and does not have to start from where his/her formal education ended.

Validation of real skills can motivate adults on the labour market to complete a formal education, throughout the whole spectrum of occupations. It enhances the status of the individual, of his/her occupation, of companies and of the country as a whole in terms of knowledge and development.

This brochure aims to introduce and explain the new concept, the validation of real skills and competence and the processes it engenders. The main focus is on informing potential collaborators and stakeholders in projects concerning validation.

The Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) and validation of non-formal and informal learning

The ETSC is contracted by the Ministry of Education to develop methodologies to validate non-formal and informal learning in Iceland. The target group for ETSC is people with little formal education and this project is initially directed at this group, but will also later be made available to qualified staff on the labour market. All aspects of validation will be addressed, aiming to shorten formal education, strengthen status on the labour market and to enhance development of competence in general. The project started in 2004. Information on methods and policy in neighbouring countries has been gathered and various pilot projects have been carried out. In the pilot projects groups of individuals with competence in a specific area have undergone validation with guidance from ETSC. Broad collaboration with all stakeholders has been the key to success in these projects. As shown in the Common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, the main principle is that all concerned parties have the same common understanding of definitions, goals and outcome of the validation and knowledge of quality standards for the procedure. ETSC will try to develop means and methods for validation of competence in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders.

What is non-formal and informal learning?

Non-formal and informal learning consists of all the competence that the individual has gained through various activities; for example work experience, work related learning, non-formal and informal learning, formal learning, social activities and family life.

In the debate on competence the following descriptions are often used for the concepts that explain how competence has been acquired:

Formal learning: Competence that is acquired in the formal school system and acknowledged with a diploma or other kind of recognition from school authorities.

Non-formal learning: Competence that is acquired through studies outside the formal educational system, for example at public educational centres or courses taken at the workplace. This competence is often documented with some kind of a diploma or attendance certificate.

Informal learning: Competence that the individual has acquired during daily routine in relation to his/her work, family, or leisure time. Competence that the individual has acquired but is not documented or declared in another way.

What is validation of non-formal and informal learning?

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is a confirmation and validation of competence regardless of how or where an individual has acquired it. The goal is that the individual achieves recognition on the competence he/she possesses at any given time, for the purpose of not having to acquire education in what he/she already knows or in order to gain recognition that leads to job development at the work place.

Documentation of competence is the foundation of the validation process. The individual documents his/her competence through the guidance of a counsellor so that he/she can identify his/her strengths, make a career decision and get an overview of his/her competence. The documentation can be a goal in itself for increasing overview, but it can also be used for later comparison with concrete competence goals, for example a competence goal for a subject in the formal school system.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is based on the possibility to shed light on the competence that is in hand and to clarify, validate and recognise it.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning used for shortening a study path within the formal education aims to validate competence as equal to specific subject standards or part thereof and to organise the continuing education of the individual in this respect. The validation is not a way to minimise the formal education in any way. The validation aims at finding the real status of the competence the individual has in order to prevent him/her having to repeat learning what he/she already knows. This kind of recognition can support further participation in continuing education and provides economic gain and saves time for the individual and the society.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning on the labour market aims to document and validate competence for the individual to gain recognition and enhance job development at work and in finding a suitable job. The competence of the individual is compared to the competence standards for certain jobs and validated against them. It should be noted that at the time this brochure was written, validation on the labour market had not yet been properly tested. The information presented here is best suited for the validation process used for the shortening of study paths in formal education. Nevertheless, it can be used as a basis for the validation process on the labour market.

What is the use of highlighting and validating competence?

For the community

Competence validation can increase the formal educational level in society. Most countries in Europe make great demands on the competence of their citizens. It benefits the whole community if citizens become aware of their competence and feel the need to develop it further. By recognizing competence, the society is motivating people to further develop their competence. Through recognition it can be avoided that those who have been on the labour market for a long time will have to start from scratch in their learning and repeat the parts they already have accomplished through experience.

For the individual

The individual receives guidance to identify and document his competence. Through that process an overview will be compiled that can be used in many ways, depending on the goal of the individual.

Shortening of formal learning: Validation of non-formal and informal learning aims to measure if the individual has competence comparable or equal to competence acquired in formal learning. If so the formal learning can be shortened and it will benefit the individual both economically and timewise.

Career development: Having an overview of competence can strengthen the position of the individual and give the employer a better view on the employee's competence. This can lead to new possibilities for the individual for example increased responsibility and new projects that are related to his/her competence.

Decision on learning and profession: A precise overview of competence can come in handy when choosing a learning path or applying for a job, precisely when it is important to take a well informed decision
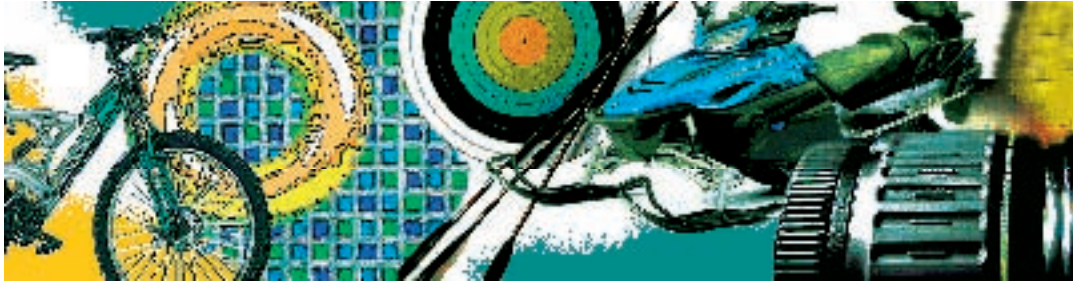
For the companies

Employees are the companies' most important resource. Knowledge of their combined competence makes the companies able to direct their resources in the best direction for both parties. When competence of the employees is brought forth the company can:

- Get the right person for the right task.
- Adjust learning/training to the needs of the employees.
- Have an overview of all the competence the company has.
- Increase professional satisfaction by giving the employees tasks in accordance with their competence.
- Contribute its resources so that acquiring more and better competence will be a normal part of the cultural heritage of the company and a normal part of a good working environment.

For educational providers

Educational providers whether they are within the non-formal or formal educational system will be more effective in reaching adults if they validate competence to shorten study paths.

Validation and acknowledgment of competence can:

- Make the school or educational offers more interesting for the adult students.
- Increase adult students with professional competence.
- Encourage students.
- Increase satisfaction amongst students.
- Assist the school in developing and adjusting its educational offers to the needs of the labour market by acknowledging the experience and knowledge of adult students with working life experience.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning
How is it done?

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is described here in five steps. It is important that a counsellor takes part in the process and guides the individual on how to identify his/her competence and document it. For those who have great work experience it is quite a job to put their competence into words. Professionals do the analysis on the status and confirmation of competence. The final validation and recognition is in the hands of various stakeholders, for example schools, education providers and companies. Further information on the involvement of these parties that take part in the validation process can be found on pages 10 and 11.

1. Information and feedback

The individual should be able to take an informed decision regarding participation and know where he/she stands at all times. Before the validation process is done it is important to inform about the goal of the validation, role of the assessors, possible outcome and the rights of the individual in the process. Distribution of information and feedback is a very important part of the whole process according to the Common European principles on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (see: www.eaea.org/news.php?k=3224&aid=3224).

2. Documentation

It is most important that the individual looks back on his/her life and documents competence that he/she has acquired through work, education and spare time. The individual gathers appropriate documents, for example recommendations from employers, job descriptions, diplomas, certificates, samples and projects. It is important that there is always good access to a counsellor who can guide and support through the whole process.

When competence is documented it is feasible to have a checklist for each and every module or standards that are up for validation. The checklist for the module is based on the module description and qualification requirements. The individual validates him/her self in accordance with the qualification requirements of the module with the help of the assessor and teaching material. On the labour market specific job qualification requirements are used.

3. Analyses

After the individual has documented his/her competence there is an interview where his/her status is considered. In the interview the individual and the assessor come together to decide how the individual's competence measures up to certain qualification requirements. The counsellor that helped with documentation can also take part in the interview as he/she has an insight into the individual's strengths and competence. The individual and the assessor go through the checklist and come to a common decision on:

1) Whether the competence is sufficient for validation/acknowledgement to take place.
2) Whether the competence fulfills qualification requirements, part thereof or not.

In some cases the outcome is at that point that the individual fulfills the qualification requirements for a certain part or module and subsequently receives validation and recognition for his/her competence (goes straight to part 5). If it is unclear whether the competence is sufficient, a confirmation process is carried out (see part 4). First there will have to be a common decision on:

3) Which method is best suited for the individual to show his/her competence (for example with a confirmation from his/her employee, various samples (for example working products), projects, an interview, oral or written confirmation).
4) Timeline for the confirmation of competence.

The conclusion of the interview is a sort of agreement for a validation plan. The time that the individual needs to prepare should be taken into consideration and observed what might be helpful in preparing for the validation on a certain aspect.

4. Confirmation

When it has been decided which competences are eligible for validation, a confirmation process is needed. The confirmation of competence is done according to a confirmation plan, accepted by the assessor and counsellor. The competence is compared to the standards. The special needs of each individual should be taken into consideration for example through offering more time, using visual example, technical confirmation and so on, all in the interest of the individual's needs for him/her to be able to show his/her competence. It is important to look for other means than the conventional tests to confirm validation and to give the individual the possibility to choose appropriate methods.

Finally the assessor informs the individual of the conclusion of the validation. If the outcome fulfills the requirements made (for example if 50% achievement to acquire grade 5 is the prescribed requirement for the module) the individual receives a valid document to confirm validation of that part. If the outcome is insufficient there has to be a discussion on whether the individual wants to acquire the parts that are missing (for example through work or education) or would choose the possibility of a second chance (the confirmation process is repeated).

5.   Validation and acceptance of competence

A module is considered validated when it has been documented officially in the name of the individual as finished or passed. It is important that the validation is accepted by the stakeholders and that they are well informed about the procedure of the validation of competence.

Common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

Summary

1. Purpose of validation of competence
2. The individual entitlement
3. The responsibility of institutions and stakeholders
4. Confidence and trust
5. Impartiality
6. Credibility and legitimacy

The European committee has published Common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning which is important to keep in mind in the process. It is strongly recom¬mended that the stakeholders in the validation get acquainted with these principles before validation of competence begins. There are six main goals. www.eaea.org/news.php?k=3224&aid=3224

1) The purpose of the validation of competence is to bring forth and validate the diverse competence the individual possesses. The purpose of the validation has to be clear from the beginning of the process: is the goal for example to validate competence in order to explore the possibility of shortening formal education, in connection to the labour market or to identify competence to gain an overview?

2) The Individual entitlement is the focus point and the validation of competence process must be focused on participants' needs. The most important aspects are trust, ownership of the conclusion and the right of the individual to appeal the conclusions. Before the validation starts it is important to inform the individual of his/her rights.

3) The responsibility of institutions and stakeholders is for example to give the individual access to proper counselling and support in the process, maintain confidentiality and to ensure that the results are credible.

4) Confidence and trust is the foundation for the validation of competence. Everyone taking part has to be well informed. The competence standards must be clear and well defined as well as information on the process and how a conclusion is reached. The purpose of the valuation needs to be clear and what becomes of the results. Information on common qualifications in the process must be clear and accessible, as must information on; time, cost, counselling and support in the process.

5) Impartiality of those who take part in the validation process is a crucial feature of the validation of competence and therefore the role and responsibility of each and every one must be clear. Impartiality can be strengthened with training and by networking and the stakeholders must encourage that.

6) Credibility and legitimacy of the validation of competence can be ensured by involvement and commitment of the stakeholders. The legitimacy is not least based on their trust and impartiality.
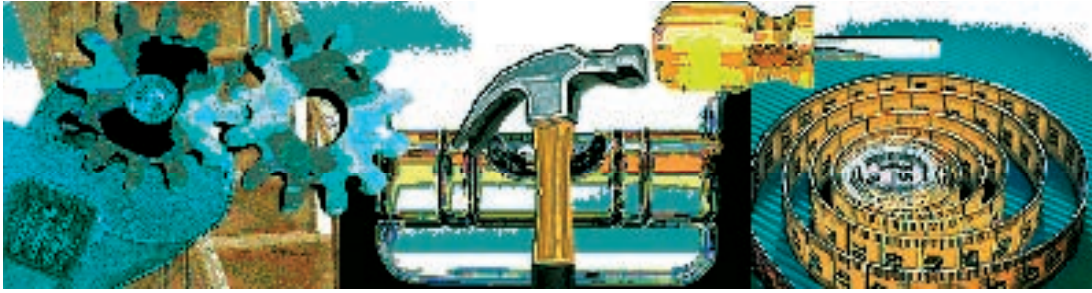
Role and responsibility in validation of non-formal and informal learning

According to the Common European principles on the validation of non-formal and informal learning there should be an emphasis on the role and responsibility of the partners involved in the validation process. Any overlap of roles should be avoided. It is preferable for the counsellor and assessor to receive training in operational procedures for validation of competence and for them to be well informed on the process.

Counsellor

Should be a Educational- and vocational counsellor, or someone that has been trained in the meth odology of validation.

1. Takes part in the information process in the beginning of the process.
2. Assists the individuals in documenting competence. Gives individual interviews, reviews data and discusses items like: strength, educational approach, educational goals and circumstances, gives motivation and support.
3. Can support the individual in the analysis interviews.

Is present through the whole process, looks after the interest of the individual and follows the Com mon Euro pean principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
It is feasible that the counsellor is educated as a career counsellor.

Assessor

Should be a professional in the relevant field.

1. Takes part in the information process in the beginning.
2. Designs checklists based on the standards set.
3. Reviews the documentation on competence and the self-evaluation of the individual.
4. Discusses the competence with the individual that is considered for validation and prepares the evaluation plan.
5. Directs the confirmation process and gives the individual feedback on the results.
6. Documents the outcome of the validation based on the system of the educational provider or com pany (recognition).

Emphasises the legal part and fairness in the procedure and follows the Common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The assessor is the one who is capable of validating competence in special competence factors and is accepted by the stakeholders.

Responsible parties and stakeholders

Representatives from the formal educational system, other educational providers, the labour market or those who have authority in the matters in question in each instance.
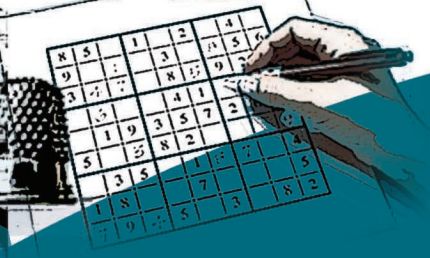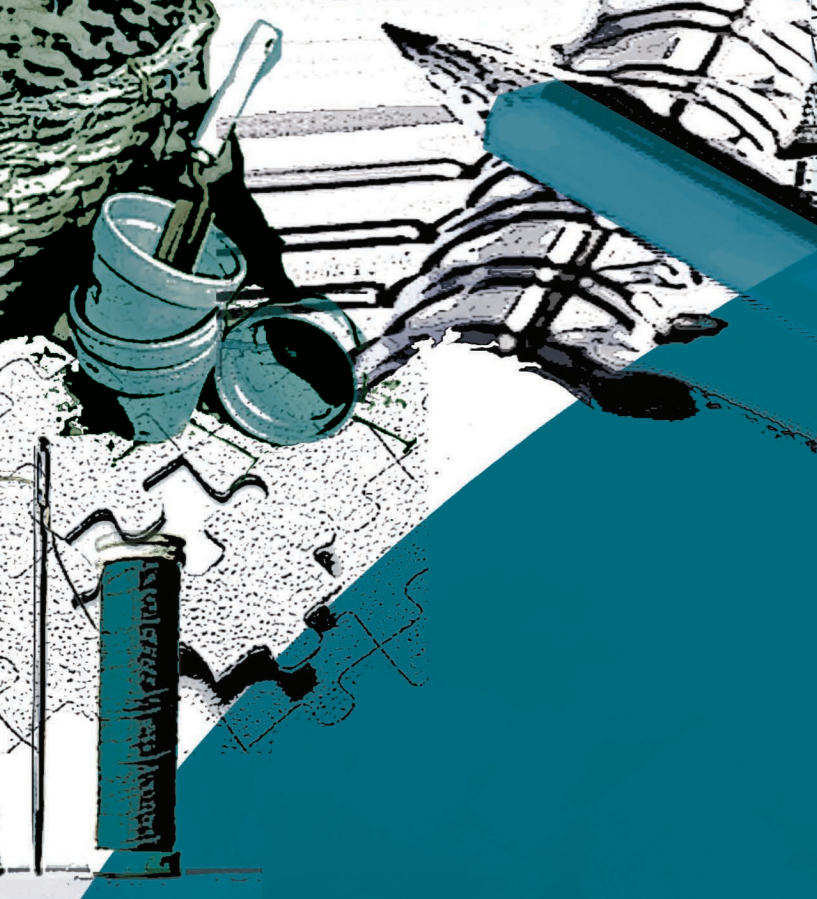
1. Take part in the project in the early stages and have influence on development and management.

2. Take part in determining the criteria to be applied, in cooperation with the as sessors.

3. Ensure that the right of the individual is respected.

4. Ensure that the individual receives guidance.

5. Ensure that the validation is legitimate and recognised in the community.

Emphasise transparency and legitimacy in the process and follow the Common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Further information

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