



**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**  
Directorate-General for Education and Culture

**IMPLEMENTATION OF  
“EDUCATION & TRAINING 2010”  
WORK PROGRAMME**

**VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING  
CONTRIBUTION OF THE COMMISSION EXPERT GROUP**

**PROGRESS REPORT**

**NOVEMBER 2003**

**Contact : [jens.bjornavold@cec.eu.int](mailto:jens.bjornavold@cec.eu.int), tel: + 32 2 299.65.58**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This note builds on previous notes presented to the expert group on validation of non-formal and informal learning (March and May 2003). We have tried to integrate the comments of the members of the group, in the same way as we have tried to integrate comments made by representatives of Member States and social partners.<sup>1</sup>

The May meeting of the expert group concluded that our approach to common principles for validation has to be 'diversified'. Validation is not carried out according to one single purpose. Developing common European criteria and principles for validation must reflect this diversity. We therefore suggest organising the discussion according to three main purposes for validation:

- Validation in relation to formal education and training.
- Validation in relation to the labour market (enterprises, branches and sectors).
- Validation in relation to voluntary work.

This diversified approach should not lead to three completely separate sets of principles. We believe that important elements can be shared across main categories, in particular those related to quality. Other elements related to individual and institutional rights and obligations will inevitably vary. A first overview of this approach is presented in section

## 2. JUSTIFICATION FOR COMMON VALIDATION PRINCIPLES

The need for common guiding principles for validation have been stated repeatedly in recent years, most significantly in the conclusions of the European conference on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Oslo May 2002 and by the Copenhagen declaration in November 2002. The 31 Ministers of Education and Training, the social partners and the Commission stated that there is a need to

*'...develop a set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels.'*

The Copenhagen agreement reflects the increasing political attention given to learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions. During the last couple of years a number of initiatives have been taken at national and European level supporting the development of new approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning. In the Communication on Lifelong Learning (November 2001) 'Valuing Learning' is a main priority, emphasising the need for mutual learning in Europe. The same attention to non-formal and informal learning can be observed in the 2001 (Education) Council decision 'Concrete future objectives for European education and training systems' and in the White Paper on Youth policies adopted by the Commission Spring 2002. Under the Objectives work programme, *developing ways for the official validation of non-formal learning experiences* has been identified as a key issue in making learning more

---

<sup>1</sup> These comments have been presented in the framework of the 'Objectives process' (follow up of the 'Common European objectives for education and training'). Working group H (making learning attractive, strengthening links to working life) is paying particular attention to validation and have contributed actively to the discussion on the common principles.

attractive and relevant for the individual. This political emphasis has been further strengthened by a Norwegian/Irish initiative to organise an informal ministerial conference on this subject June 2004. This conference, currently being planned, could be instrumental in promoting common principles for validation. All these initiatives reflect the very strong political; momentum existing in this particular field.

### **3. WHY COMMON PRINCIPLES FOR VALIDATION?**

Developing a set of common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning is a way to bring added value to ongoing work at local, regional and national level. The main motivation for developing such principles is, according to the Copenhagen Declaration, to strengthen the *comparability* of approaches at different levels and in different contexts. Methods and systems developed so far have to a large extent been designed and set up in isolation from each other and can not easily be linked together and combined. We can to a certain extent speak of a process where 'islands' of validation have been established but where the 'bridges' between these remain to be drawn and built. Lack of comparability makes it difficult for individuals to combine learning outcomes acquired in different settings, at different levels and in different countries.

*A set of common European principles on validation can contribute to increased comparability and coherence and can thus support lifelong and lifewide learning. Developing a set of common European principles for validation is challenging in the sense that it has not been done before and in the sense that an appropriate form and level of abstraction have to be agreed. A set of European principles cannot replace work at national, regional, sectoral and local level but have to bring in an additional element contributing to the linking and bridging of approaches at different levels and in different contexts. A challenge is thus to elaborate on how such 'meta-principles' can be formulated.*

Following this, the task of developing common criteria for validation can be defined in both a negative and positive way. Negative in the sense that we need to define what these principles and criteria *should not do*. Positive in the sense that we need to define, as precisely as possible, *what we want to achieve*. It is from the outset clear that these principles will include technical as well as political aspects. Validation is on the one hand a question of sound methodologies and transparent institutional arrangements but it is also a question of making political choices on how to value knowledge and experiences. Discussions in the group must reflect this, - it is crucial that a proposal from the group is able to communicate the political choices at hand.

A set of common European principles should contribute to the long term development of high quality, cost efficient approaches to identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

#### **3.1. What we should avoid?**

Setting up common European principles for validation should not result in a narrowing down of methodological and institutional options and approaches at local, regional and national level. This is on the one hand based on practical experiences underlining the need to tailor instruments to the target group and the field of activity in question. Standardised validation instruments targeting too wide an area will probably not be able to meet strict validity requirements (will not be able to 'measure' what they set out to 'measure').

Standardisation is furthermore in conflict with the principles underlying the Copenhagen and Objectives processes. Both initiatives emphasise the need for voluntary co-operation building on the existing diversity of systems. Setting up common European principles requires a balance between diversity and fragmentation; diversity is an asset we need to exploit; fragmentation must be avoided if basic objectives related to lifelong and lifewide learning is to be realised.

*The voluntary approach used both in the Copenhagen and the Objectives-process is important for the implementation of common principles for validation. A top-down regulatory approach is out of the question. The only way we can promote increased coherency is by advocating sound and constructive principles which actually can make a difference at national, regional, sectoral and enterprise level. A set of common principles must not be seen as negative restrictions, it must rather be seen as a set of positive aims and objectives, something to strive for rather than something to avoid.*

### **3.2. What we should try to achieve?**

Strengthening the comparability of European approaches to validation can be realised in different ways:

*The quality of validation methodologies and systems must be addressed. Major differences in the quality of validation will inevitably threaten any ambition to bridge and link systems. Quality is on the one hand a question of how to develop and ensure the highest possible reliability and validity. Methods as well as standards for validation must be developed so as to support maximum objectivity. The credibility of validations is linked to the overall validity and reliability but also an issue which has to be treated in its own right, largely influenced by the design of institutions and the way stakeholders are involved (or not involved). Methodologies and systems must be designed for credibility. Enterprises, education and training institutions and other users must be able to trust the outcomes of validation processes. A set of common criteria at European level could provide basic guidelines to actors at local, regional and national level on how to strengthen validity, reliability and credibility.*

*It is worth noting that the Member States and social partners (in group H of the Objectives-process) to a large extent agree with the approach developed so far. The emphasis on transparency of procedures as well as clear definitions and divisions of responsibilities has been appreciated. It is also worth noting that the reference to already existing national and international standards/principles (for example EN 45013/ISO 17024) is important. The expert group must consider how such cross-referencing could be systematically (and visibly) applied.*

*Individual rights in the field of validation must be addressed. An individual right can be formulated in a strong as well as in a weak/soft way. A strong formulation would imply that individuals enjoy a legal right to validation of non-formal and informal learning, as is the case in Norway and France in relation to upper secondary education and training. A weak/soft formulation would (for example) imply that a minimum institutional framework is put into place, establishing a set of services (ranging from counselling via transparent procedures to easily available methodologies). The soft approach could be understood as guaranteeing individual access to validation. A third main alternative would be to completely avoid references to individual rights (and consequently; to institutional obligations). This would mean that the common principles would be entirely focused on questions of quality assurance. Whether this is a viable option needs to be*

discussed. We should, however, keep in mind that the question of individual rights originally was raised in the Communication on lifelong learning (November 2001). While clearly a political question (and a question of resources) access to validation is a crucial aspect in any strategy on lifelong learning. If all learning outcomes (irrespective of origin) are to be integrated in the lifelong learning careers of individuals, -measures to identify, assess and recognise them have to be put in place. The common principles could contribute to clarifying this need and necessity.

*Member States and social partners have expressed reluctance to accept a (strong, legally binding) formulation on an individual right to validation. Several members of the expert group have also expressed this reluctance. Following this the expert group needs to consider how a soft formulation of individual rights/institutional obligations could be formulated. To entirely drop the reference to individual rights does not seem to be an option at this stage. This is partly due to the fact that certain MS already have introduced rights in this area, partly due to the political signals given at European level.*

It is crucial to consider whether attention to quality and individual rights is sufficient to achieve sufficient complementarity between approaches at different levels and in various contexts. In addition we have to ask whether there are ways in which *the bridging and linking* of validation systems can be addressed in an explicit way? The question is how a set of common principles for validation may support (and extend) credit transfer system developed within formal education and training systems (notably the existing European Credit transfer System developed for higher education and the credit transfer system currently being considered for vocational education and training - following the Copenhagen Declaration).

Generally speaking, a set of common principles and criteria must make it possible for different systems to communicate with each other, be this across national, sectoral or institutional borders.

#### **4. COMMON PRINCIPLES FOR THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING**

The criteria and principles listed in the following are basically the same as those discussed in the meeting of the expert group in May. As noted then, elements from various national systems (notably Norway and France) as well from international quality standards (notably European Norm 45013/ISO 17024 on 'certification of personnel') have been used. The expert group has to consider the following challenge:

- (i) Whether the proposed list of criteria (and the indicated categories) provide a sensible starting point for developing common European criteria;
- (ii) Whether the proposed list of criteria comply with/are in conflict with criteria already established at national, regional, sectoral or local level;
- (iii) Whether the proposed list of criteria brings in an added European value to existing practises at other levels?
- (iv) Whether the new matrix presented below represents a sensible approach?

*If the answer to (iv) is positive we suggest to use the matrix as an instrument for organising our work in the coming months. The Virtual Community should be used actively to address the various aspects touched upon by the proposal. While the expert group will play an important role in developing the principles, success can not be*

achieved without involving a much bigger group of experts and stakeholders in as many countries as possible.

Note that the principles presented below basically are identical to those discussed in May. Following the input from Member States and social partners as well as distinguishing between three main validation categories, the main difference can be found in the category 'individual rights'. This is illustrated by the 'principle of individual ownership; it is not obvious that this principle can be applied in an enterprise setting where validation is linked to human resource development and where the enterprise is an important stakeholder in the process. This does not exclude a focus on 'privacy' and 'dialogue', principles that could be introduced in an enterprise setting, irrespective of the question of ownership.

Members of the expert group need to consider how the current set of principles can be differentiated and further developed so as to reflect the different purposes of validation. Members of the expert group need also to consider how the current list of principles can be extended, improved and strengthened.

<b>Validation; the general purpose</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation of competences, be these acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal setting, aim at making visible the full range of knowledge, skills and experiences held by an individual.</li> <li>• Validation of competences, be these acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal setting, can serve formative (support an ongoing learning process not leading to a formal certificate) as well as summative purposes (leading to a formal certificate).</li> </ul>		
<b>Validation in relation to formal education and training</b>	<b>Validation in relation to the labour market (enterprises, branches and sectors)</b>	<b>Validation in relation to voluntary work and leisure time activities</b>
<b>Individual rights</b>	<b>Individual rights</b>	<b>Individual rights</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation is voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not.</li> <li>• The results of validation must be the property of the individual</li> <li>• Individuals enjoy the right to appeal a validation result; this right should be presented in a transparent way at the start of the validation process.</li> </ul> <p><b>Obligations of institutions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education and training systems should provide a legal and practical basis enabling individuals to have their competences validated.</li> <li>• Validation should be supported by guidance and counselling services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation must be based on a dialogue between the individual employee and the enterprise, organisation in question.</li> <li>• Individuals enjoy the right to appeal a validation result; this right should be presented in a transparent way at the start of the validation process.</li> </ul> <p><b>Obligations of the enterprise, organisation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The results of validation must normally be the property of the individual. If something else is agreed, the privacy of the individual must be respected.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation is voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not.</li> <li>• The results of validation must be the property of the individual</li> <li>• Individuals enjoy the right to appeal a validation result; this right should be presented in a transparent way at the start of the validation process.</li> </ul> <p><b>Obligations of institutions</b></p>
<b>Quality of validations; transparency of procedures</b>	<b>Quality of validations; transparency of procedures</b>	<b>Quality of validations; transparency of procedures</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The validation process must give confidence to all concerned that the person named is competent to undertake specific tasks or has some other specified competence.</li> <li>• Validation schemes must be designed in such a way that potential users, be they individuals or institutions, are able to observe and judge the entire validation process.</li> <li>• The basis (methodologies) of validation should be stated clearly (written exams, practical tests, involvement in a specified field of activity etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The validation process must give confidence to all concerned that the person named is competent to undertake specific tasks or has some other specified competence.</li> <li>• Validation schemes must be designed in such a way that potential users, be they individuals or institutions, are able to observe and judge the entire validation process.</li> <li>• The basis (methodologies) of validation should be stated clearly (written exams, practical tests, involvement in a specified field of activity etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The validation process must give confidence to all concerned that the person named is competent to undertake specific tasks or has some other specified competence.</li> <li>• Validation schemes must be designed in such a way that potential users, be they individuals or institutions, are able to observe and judge the entire validation process.</li> <li>• The basis (methodologies) of validation should be stated clearly (written exams, practical tests, involvement in a specified field of activity etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Quality of validation; transparency of criteria</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>Quality of validation; transparency of criteria</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>Quality of validation; transparency of criteria</i></b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The criteria and requirements for validation (standards, reference points etc.) must be presented in such a way that they are transparent to all involved, including the individual being validated.</li> <li>• The requirements met by the individual must be so precisely described that two validation bodies acting independently of each other can be expected to reach the same conclusion.</li> <li>• The criteria used by assessors when ‘weighting’ (parallel to the ‘marking’ taking place in formal education) different competence aspects must, as far as possible, be clarified to all involved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The criteria and requirements for validation (standards, reference points etc.) must be presented in such a way that they are transparent to all involved, including the individual being validated.</li> <li>• The requirements met by the individual must be so precisely described that two validation bodies acting independently of each other can be expected to reach the same conclusion.</li> <li>• The criteria used by assessors when ‘weighting’ (parallel to the ‘marking’ taking place in formal education) different competence aspects must, as far as possible, be clarified to all involved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The criteria and requirements for validation (standards, reference points etc.) must be presented in such a way that they are transparent to all involved, including the individual being validated.</li> <li>• The requirements met by the individual must be so precisely described that two validation bodies acting independently of each other can be expected to reach the same conclusion.</li> <li>• The criteria used by assessors when ‘weighting’ (parallel to the ‘marking’ taking place in formal education) different competence aspects must, as far as possible, be clarified to all involved.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Quality of validation; training of assessors</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>Quality of validation; training of assessors</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>Quality of validation; training of assessors</i></b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessors must be provided with systematic initial and continuing training; where possible local, regional and national networks of assessors should be set up to assure updating and coherent practises.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessors must be provided with systematic initial and continuing training; where possible local, regional and national networks of assessors should be set up to assure updating and coherent practises.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessors must be provided with systematic initial and continuing training; where possible local, regional and national networks of assessors should be set up to assure updating and coherent practises.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Credibility of validation; inclusion of stakeholders</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>Credibility of validation; inclusion of stakeholders</i></b></p>	<p><b><i>Credibility of validation; inclusion of stakeholders</i></b></p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of validation criteria (standards, reference points) must involve all relevant stakeholders (for example by involving social partners in cases where work experience is being assessed).</li> <li>• Validation bodies need to be impartial. The system of validation, at all levels of operation, should be organised so as to safeguard impartiality and enable participation from all parties involved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of validation criteria (standards, reference points) must involve all relevant stakeholders (for example by involving social partners in cases where work experience is being assessed).</li> <li>• Validation bodies need to be impartial. The system of validation, at all levels of operation, should be organised so as to safeguard impartiality and enable participation from all parties involved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of validation criteria (standards, reference points) must involve all relevant stakeholders (for example by involving social partners in cases where work experience is being assessed).</li> <li>• Validation bodies need to be impartial. The system of validation, at all levels of operation, should be organised so as to safeguard impartiality and enable participation from all parties involved.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Comparability of validations; the European dimension</i></b>	<b><i>Comparability of validations; the European dimension</i></b>	<b><i>Comparability of validations; the European dimension</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation approaches must be designed and set up according to the principles listed above and in such a way that they can be understood at European and international level. Where possible, common European elements (like the European CV, the single transparency framework/Europass, and other instruments supporting transparency of qualifications) should be used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation approaches must be designed and set up according to the principles listed above and in such a way that they can be understood at European and international level. Where possible, common European elements (like the European CV, the single transparency framework/Europass, and other instruments supporting transparency of qualifications) should be used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation approaches must be designed and set up according to the principles listed above and in such a way that they can be understood at European and international level. Where possible, common European elements (like the European CV, the single transparency framework/Europass, and other instruments supporting transparency of qualifications) should be used.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Etc.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Etc.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Etc.</i></li> </ul>

## 5. A EUROPEAN INFRASTRUCTURE?

While indicating a possible direction for the discussion on common principles, it is apparent that a set of common European principles easily are reduced to a set of ‘good wishes’ providing limited added value to the ongoing practical work. The group must therefore discuss how these principles can be embedded in a European infrastructure supporting the strengthening of comparability and quality of European validation approaches. A crucial instrument in this context is the European Inventory on non-formal learning now being set up. By providing an overview over the different approaches, systems and methodologies, this inventory will be instrumental in monitoring how the overarching principles actually are followed up. The inventory thus provides an important basis for the co-operation at political level, which necessarily have to follow an agreement on common European principles. The first report of the Inventory (Colardyn and Bjornavold 2003) presents us with an opportunity to discuss how to go about this task in the most efficient way. The note on possible ways to categorise data (26.9.03) also points in this direction.