SOC/521
**Validation of qualifications
– non-formal and informal
learning**

Brussels, 16 September 2015

OPINION
of the
European Economic and Social Committee
on the
**Validation of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning – the
practical input of organised civil society
(own-initiative opinion)**

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On 21 January 2015, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on the

> *Validation of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning – the practical input of organised civil society.*

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 17 June 2015.

At its 510th plenary session, held on 16 and 17 September 2015 (meeting of 16 September 2015), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion with 212 votes in favour and 8 abstentions.

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 The EESC strongly believes that emphasis should be placed on identifying, recording, assessing and hence validating the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and doing so in the most comparable way possible that is comprehensible to all parties involved, particularly employers and educational institutions.

1.2 Member States should provide opportunities for people of different ages and qualification levels to get the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning validated. This may require further collaboration between providers of such education, public authorities and other interested parties, including on issues such as funding and recognition.

1.3 The EESC calls for support for all stakeholders, particularly social partners and other civil society organisations, to make them aware of the benefits of validation and enable them to participate actively in setting national qualifications frameworks and determining professional qualifications.

1.4 The public must be given relevant information on the benefits of having skills recognised and the options and mechanisms for doing so. The EESC recommends that Member States broaden the range of institutions providing this kind of guidance and counselling and, in particular, enlist employment services, youth information centres, educational institutions, employers, trade unions, career advice centres, youth organisations, women's organisations, organisations providing support to migrants and people with disabilities, and public institutions.

1.5 A good national legislative framework is a prerequisite for ensuring the equal value of certificates achieved through formal and non-formal or informal study. This places significant demands on the quality of validation processes, which should be financially supported by, for example, the European Social Fund.

1.6 The EESC calls on educational institutions, particularly secondary schools, vocational training colleges and universities, to promote the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal means. The EU has many examples of good practice in this field and these should be promoted.

1.7 The EESC is convinced that collective bargaining and social dialogue between unions and employers could play a key role in the process of validating non-formal education and lifelong learning and it should be used as an instrument to work on validating non-formal learning as an important contribution to the debate on employability and instruments to support it.

1.8 In the current climate of high youth unemployment, support should be given to opportunities for interaction between public and private employment agencies, volunteer organisations (particularly for young people) and employers. This can serve as a means of promoting the visibility – and raising awareness of the importance and value – of non-formal and informal education in voluntary organisations, as well as strengthening mutual trust.

1.9 Support should therefore be provided for the development and use of self-evaluation tools that help people identify and describe their learning outcomes. The experience of civil society organisations should be harnessed here. The EESC has already supported the creation of a European skills passport and, subsequently, the Europass Experience. It is therefore disappointed that the European Commission has suspended the preparatory work on the Europass Experience and calls on it to see this initiative through to completion.

2. **Introduction: non-formal and informal learning**

2.1 Despite the unfavourable economic and social circumstances many EU countries are currently facing, in which even formal education does not guarantee finding a job, the EESC believes that the EU cannot fail to validate the hidden wealth that lies in the experience and skills that people have acquired through non-formal or informal means.

2.2 This validation could provide opportunities in particular to certain disadvantaged groups (such as women, migrants, young people, older workers). However, it should not create false hopes that they would quickly find a place in the labour market. This requires economic and social policy aimed more at investment, creating quality jobs, and reducing poverty and the risk of social exclusion. These policies must also guide and support the strengthening of education, vocational training and retraining systems.

2.3   The EESC is drawing on an important document, the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning of 20 December 2012[1]. It highlights the fact that *the validation of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified. The validation of relevant knowledge, skills and competences has a valuable contribution to make in improving the functioning of the labour market, in promoting mobility and in enhancing competitiveness and economic growth.*

2.4   The Council sees the following as key stakeholders with an important role to play in facilitating opportunities for non-formal and informal learning and any subsequent validation processes: employer organisations, individual employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognising professional qualifications and in assessing and certifying learning outcomes, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers, and civil society organisations.

2.5   As set out in the Council Recommendation of 2012, by 2018 Member States must have in place, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities and as they deem appropriate, *arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to:*

   −   *have knowledge, skills and competences validated which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning, including - where applicable - via open educational resources;*
   −   *obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, partial qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences (…).*

2.6   According to the Council Recommendation, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning should include the following elements, as appropriate, whilst allowing each individual to take advantage of any of these, either separately or in combination, in accordance with his/her needs:

   −   *IDENTIFICATION of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;*
   −   *DOCUMENTATION of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;*
   −   *ASSESSMENT of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;*

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[1]   http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF

- *CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of a qualification, as credits leading to a qualification, or as otherwise deemed appropriate.*

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning[2] from 2009 (and the recently updated version from 2015) have been written for individuals and organisations that are responsible for establishing, developing, implementing and running validation. Those involved operate at various levels (European, national, sectoral and local) and in various contexts (public, private and voluntary sectors, education and training, and labour market services). The aim of the guidelines is to clarify the conditions for carrying out validations and to make stakeholders aware of their options at different stages of the process.

2.7   The EESC has on a number of occasions expressed its appreciation of the benefits of non-formal education and the importance of recognising them. However, this opinion is the first time we are making the case for it in a consolidated manner. It aims to summarise the views of representatives of employers, workers and other civil society organisations on the practical procedures for validation and to put forward workable proposals from their own perspective.

3.   **Skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning**

3.1   The decline in specialised production based on skilled trades, technological changes and the rise of the service sector mean that 21st century employers now put greater emphasis on "personality", or "transversal" and "transferable" skills. The importance of lifelong learning and validation of the knowledge and skills acquired outside of schools is on the increase.

3.2   In 2012, the University of Bath and GHK Consulting drafted a study for the European Youth Forum looking at the impact of non-formal learning in youth organisations on young people's employability[3]. Youth organisations are important providers of such learning. This type of education in youth organisations is not primarily aimed at increasing employability, but research has shown that the skills acquired through it could help achieve this.

3.3   This study confirms the general recognition that the skills required by employers clearly correspond to those nurtured by the non-formal learning sector. Five of the six most frequently required soft skills are among those further developed by youth organisations – the sole exception being numeracy. The soft skills most sought by employers include: communication, organisation and planning, decision-making, teamwork, reliability/independence and numeracy. These soft skills are seen as key competencies for working successfully. Certain character traits are also developed, such as personal motivation, initiative and creativity, which are personal traits related to reliability/independence and enterprise.

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2   http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4054

3   http://issuu.com/yomag/docs/reportnfe_print

3.4   Everyone is involved in the process of lifelong non-formal and informal learning. For instance, women (and men) often develop skills while performing domestic chores, which could be transferred to the workplace, especially in the social services field. If they have to change jobs because of redundancy or their family situation, they can use this knowledge in the transition to their new work, or female migrants could use it to get their first job. The EESC has already called on Member States[4] to "speed up the process of recognising qualifications and experience gained abroad to enable women to find jobs corresponding to their skills and aspirations", to "consider work in some sectors (such as cleaning, caring for children and the elderly, hotels and catering and agriculture) as offering opportunities for less qualified migrant women, provided that steps are taken to ensure that these sectors are legalised, professionalised and upgraded and that women are given training in these areas and enabled to develop their careers". Social partners were called on to "facilitate the recognition of women migrants' qualifications in collective agreements".

3.5   A shift in emphasis towards the outcomes of such learning is important if validation of the non-formal and informal learning is to be successful. Indeed, since 2004 this has been expressly encouraged in the EU policy agenda for education, training and employment. The recent study by CEDEFOP (based on research conducted between 2013 and 2015) shows that the shift to learning outcomes is currently gaining ground across Europe – for example, in the creation of national qualifications frameworks, in defining and describing professional skills, in the use of learning outcomes in curricula and assessments and as reference points for validation. This is expected to increase the transparency, relevance and quality of education and its openness to non-formal and informal learning. At the practical level, it is important for students to have clear goals: this will provide motivation, enable flexible study plans and steer the focus towards assessing outcomes. At the same time, in order to achieve sound educational outcomes, methods and learning/teaching processes themselves must also be improved.

3.6   It therefore follows that emphasis should be placed on evaluating and documenting the outcomes of non-formal learning in a manner that is comprehensible to all parties involved, particularly employers and educational institutions. Then, insofar as people are interested and the required conditions have been put in place for them, these could then be recognised as standard professional qualifications on an equal footing with formal education programmes.

4.   **A practical perspective on the validation of skills and qualifications**

4.1   **Guidance, expertise and information**

4.1.1   Member States should ensure, as part of the validation process, that individuals and organisations have access to information and guidance on the benefits of – and opportunities

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[4]   SOC/513 – Inclusion of migrant women in the labour market.

for – validation, as well as on the relevant procedures, and that validation of non-formal and informal learning is supported by appropriate guidance and counselling and is readily accessible.

4.1.2 Arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning must be appropriately laid out whilst taking into consideration national, regional and/or local, as well as sectoral, needs and conditions.

4.1.3 Opportunities must be provided for people of different ages and qualification levels to take part. This may require further collaboration between the non-profit sector, public authorities and other interested parties, including on issues such as funding and validation.

4.1.4 People should be informed about other benefits of continued participation in voluntary organisations. Even a short period of involvement can have a major influence on the development of skills and can improve employability.

4.1.5 The public must be brought on board in a coordinated manner and given relevant information about the benefits of validating skills and the options and mechanisms for doing so. We recommend that Member States broaden the range of institutions providing this kind of guidance and counselling and, in particular, enlist employment services, youth information centres, educational institutions, employers, trade unions, career advice centres, voluntary associations, youth organisations and public institutions.

4.1.6 Guidance in the validation process is essential and beneficial, particularly for young people, at all stages – from identification through to certification. It should:

- help people determine their needs and motivate them to get involved in the validation process;
- create a safe environment for building trust with advisers – one that is not too institutional so that people can feel at ease;
- suitably incorporate information on validation as a recognised method directed at people who have completed training courses by using existing information and advisory mechanisms – in other words, show validation to be a possible route, but without encouraging unrealistic expectations.

4.2 **Coordination of stakeholders**

4.2.1 In the view of the Council, Member States *should promote the coordination and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the development and implementation of the elements and principles of validation. To foster participation in this process:*

- *employers, youth organisations and civil society organisations should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or*

in voluntary activities, using relevant validation tools to ensure transparency such as those developed under the Europass framework and Youthpass;

– *education and training providers should facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate and possible, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in such settings.*

4.2.2   The EESC therefore considers support for all stakeholders important, particularly for social partners and other civil society organisations, so that they can be made aware of the benefits of validation and actively participate in setting national qualifications frameworks and determining professional qualifications. Working towards "real" changes in the attitudes of participating parties could be very difficult, particularly in Member States that do not consider this area a priority or where access to validation of non-formal or informal learning has no real support nationally. It would be useful to provide a platform/support and so on for those that have already made progress in this area (through pilot projects, for example) in their efforts at the national level.

4.3   **Validation and national qualifications frameworks and systems**

4.3.1   Member States should enable individuals to obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, partial qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences. They should ensure that validation procedures are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the European Qualifications Framework and that synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, such as ECTS and ECVET.

4.3.2   Social partners and other civil society organisations, in particular, should be involved as much as possible (and suitably encouraged) in designing national qualifications systems. The experience of some Member States shows that, to implement validation procedures at the sectoral level, committees and units for sectoral skills need to be set up and staffed with the right people. It would then be possible to draw up national standards for individual professions and professional qualifications in the identified areas.

4.4   **Ensuring the quality of validation**

4.4.1   Member States should ensure that transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks are put in place, since this type of measure supports reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools. This mainly means having appropriate legislation – a regulatory framework for validation and guarantees acquired through certification in accordance with national qualifications frameworks derived from the European Qualifications Framework.

4.4.2   For the EESC, this means that equal standing must be ensured for certificates obtained through formal, informal or non-formal learning. This places significant demands on the quality of recognition processes, which should be financially supported by, for example, the European Social Fund.

4.5   **Validation from educational institutions**

4.5.1   Educational institutions play a key role in the validation process. The Council recommends that *education and training providers facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate and possible, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in such settings.*

4.5.2   The EESC calls on universities to further promote the validation of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal means. Ireland could serve as an example here. Its National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 supports the civic vocation of higher education and its "engagement with wider society" as one of the "three interconnected core roles of higher education". It defines this engagement as: "engagement with business and industry, with the civic life of the community, with public policy and practice, with artistic, cultural and sporting life and with other educational providers in the community and region, and it includes an increasing emphasis on international engagement"[5].

4.5.3   However, it is not only universities that can recognise the results of non-formal and informal learning. In Malta, for example, the secondary school certificate and profile presented in September 2010 recognises all forms of learning during the five years of secondary school. For both formal and informal education, it provides credits that encourage students to pursue further and higher education.

4.6   **Validation in connection with the labour market**

4.6.1   The Council Recommendation stresses the importance of implementing validation in the workplace and recommends that *Member States promote the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, such as employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, and national entities involved in the process of validating professional qualifications. Employers should also promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired while working.*

4.6.2   Validation of non-formal and informal learning could be part of collective agreements (as is the case in the Netherlands). This is an excellent example of providing access to validation for employees and contributes to effective human resource management in businesses. Employers should be actively involved in the evaluation of knowledge, skills and competences, both in

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5   National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. www.hei.ie

the workplace and when setting up education and training programmes, which will improve the value of validation and help to build confidence in it.

4.6.3   Collective bargaining and social dialogue between unions and employers could play a key role in the process of validating non-formal education and lifelong learning. A specific example on the European scale is the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF), which is working on validation of non-formal learning as an important contribution to the debate on employability and instruments to support it.

4.6.4   In some countries, a new role is taking shape for union activists who provide advice during working hours and negotiate with employers on free access to educational opportunities in the workplace. In Austria, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, trade union representatives act as "ambassadors", supporting staff in further education, filling gaps in their skills and advising companies on their educational needs[6].

4.6.5   Given that employers place great value on involvement in youth organisations when hiring young people with little or no work experience, this involvement should be supported as one of the ways of helping young people make the transition from school to work[7].

4.6.6   Furthermore, everyone interested in seeking validation should be given better guidance and coaching so that at the job application stage they are better able to present the skills and competences they obtained by non-formal and informal means and better understand how these skills apply in the work environment and help them in specific work-related tasks. This is a process to which career guidance services, counsellors in schools and universities, the youth sector and employment agencies, as well as employers and international organisations, can contribute. They could also help young people on this front by giving them information and useful tips.

4.7   **Validation in the voluntary sector**

4.7.1   In its Recommendation, the Council points out *the importance of actively involving the voluntary sector in validation schemes. Youth and civil society organisations should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities, using relevant validation tools to ensure transparency such as those developed under the Europass framework and Youthpass.*

4.7.2   People should be more aware of the value employers place on skills and competences developed non-formally or informally, for example through volunteering. This is especially true for those with a lower level of education, who are often less aware of the value this type of activity has for employers and are less well trained in how to present these skills.

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6   Learning while working. Success stories on workplace learning in Europe, Cedefop. 59, p 2011 59 2011;

7   http://issuu.com/yomag/docs/reportnfe_print

4.7.3   In the current climate of high youth unemployment, support should be given to opportunities for interaction between public and private employment agencies, volunteer organisations (particularly for young people) and employers. This can serve as a means of promoting the visibility – and raising awareness of the importance and value – of non-formal and informal education in voluntary organisations, as well as strengthening mutual trust.

4.7.4   Support needs to be given to developing the assessment and training plans of volunteer organisations, as their existence is linked to a higher declared level of skills development. In this respect it should also be noted that the activities of volunteer organisations vary significantly, and so the benchmarks they use to assess the skills developed through their activities also vary. In the light of this, greater consistency in terminology and evaluation methods in the voluntary field should be promoted. Alignment of benchmarks could result in, for example, more volunteers being aware of the skills they develop through their involvement in voluntary social services.

4.8   **Tools for validation**

4.8.1   The Council Recommendation emphasises common European validation tools to ensure transparency, such as the Europass framework and Youthpass. *Member States should ensure that synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, such as ECTS and ECVET.*

4.8.2   The knowledge and skills developed through involvement in civil society organisations are also valuable on the labour market, but are often not documented or sufficiently visible. Support should therefore be provided for development and use of self-evaluation tools that help people identify the outcomes of learning through experience in civil society organisations. For instance, creating personal competence portfolios could offer people added value in their further education and career aspirations.

4.8.3   Certificates and portfolios are an important element in the validation of competences and qualifications acquired though non-formal means. Providers of non-formal education should aim to issue certificates/documents describing in detail the nature and results of participation in their educational activities and should make people aware of the value these activities have. This is above all about the value these documents have in terms of education (improving people's awareness of the skills and competences they acquired in civil society organisations and how they can use these skills when looking for work or in further education), rather than as proof of an achievement.

4.8.4   The EESC has already supported the creation of a European skills passport and, subsequently, the Europass Experience. It is therefore disappointed that the European Commission has suspended the implementation of this initiative.

Brussels, 16 September 2015

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Henri Malosse

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