

# The AVA horizontal analysis and thematic cases



Action plan for validation and non-formal  
adult education



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# 1. Introduction

This document has the aim to draft a cross-thematic analysis of the national validation practices described by the AVA survey respondents as well as to present four thematic cases to illustrate how practices fulfill - or on the contrary face difficulties in terms of - the three key concepts for the AVA survey.

The analysis investigates how the validation practices for non-formal learning contribute to make validation arrangements and activities inclusive by securing permeability of processes and results and by reducing the risk of fragmentation in validation arrangements. The horizontal analysis also includes a description of challenges, obstacles and perspectives for further development of validation activities in non-formal learning activities.

It is the hope of the authors of this report that this review can act as the basis for formulating a strategy for validation in non-formal learning targeted disadvantaged groups.

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*In the first chapter* a description of the survey structure, analysis levels and results is provided in order to make visible the platform for further development of results according to AVA project aims.

*The second chapter* summarizes statements about the three key concepts: permeability, fragmentation and inclusion and provides, as far as possible, an overview by summing up comments and concerns of the respondents in each of the themes.

*The second chapter needs* to be understood both as a qualitative review as the backbone for inspiration and reflections for further development of validation activities in non-formal learning settings and the basis for development of four thematic cases presented *in the fourth chapter*.

*The third chapter* also proposes suggestions resulting from analysis and list the recommendations pointed out by the AVA survey's respondents.



## 1.1 Structure of survey analysis, data and results

### 1.1.1. Data figures and data quality

This analysis is drafted on the basis of a survey, which was produced by NVL with the support of the AVA consortium. The survey was conducted with the support of the software Survey Monkey. It was launched in February 2015 and officially closed in June 2015.

The total number of respondents was 50. 20 countries are represented. Non-formal adult education providers (29) and umbrella organisations (10) were supposed to be the main target group. However, thanks to the broad dissemination, the survey was completed by other 11 organisations.

The survey was two folded in order to gather the most precise information possible from the two groups of stakeholders (Meso level= umbrella organisations and other organisations working with policy, programmes, etc. on validation; Micro level= Providers and other organisations working directly with validation). Responses are distributed as follow:

- Meso level: 16 respondents
- Micro level: 34 respondents

The level of completeness of the responses differs significantly among respondents (*from* mostly just ticking Yes / No *to* more detailed descriptions of context, structure, cooperation partners, methods a.o.)

Due to this, this report doesn't aim at providing an exhaustive picture of the validation arrangements in the countries involved, but at presenting a snapshot of impression and opinions coming from the non-formal adult education sector as well as collecting successful practice and methods to support disadvantaged groups to undertake validation processes. The image below illustrates a categorization of respondents by numbers:

### Categorisation of country representation by number of respondents





### 1.1.2. Analysis structure

The analysis of survey data are carried out according to the following structure:

## Analysis structure



The model illustrates the structure of data representation comprising three analytical levels:

1. National reports:
2. National summaries
3. Horizontal analysis

The model illustrates the first analytical trace, step 1 to 3:

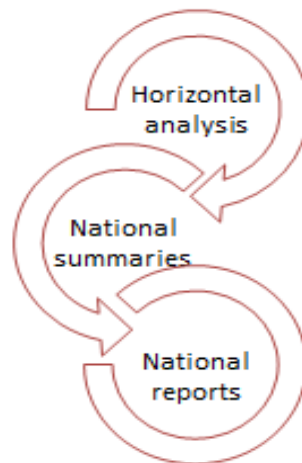
- (1) The national reports (Available on demand) illustrate data from the country respondents presented in a thematic structure. The aim of the national reports is to provide the detailed and contextualized data as they stand out clearly according to respondents.
- (2) The National summaries (Analysis report, section 1), present in a condensed form the data from country reports. Information has been grouped following the three AVA key-concepts. As preliminary stated in the introduction to national reports (step 1) and national summaries (step 2), these three key-concepts are identified and defined as *permeability*, *fragmentation* and *inclusion*. The interrelation of validation practice and key-concepts are illustrated by the model below:





(3) The horizontal analysis provides the cross-country and cross-thematic analysis of results. This analytical level comprises the main part of the AVA survey analysis and provides as such the core line for the AVA group's further use of survey results.

In order to trace backwards – from the condensed, cross-country, cross-thematic conclusions and recommendations to national contextual data – the analytical structure also allows for the reversed process while examining the national origination to more holistic conclusions and recommendations, as illustrated by the model below.





## 1.2 Context and definitions

According to Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01) and European guidelines for validation non-formal and informal learning (2015), validation is defined as ‘a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard’ (Council of the EU, 2012, p. 5).

To clarify the basic features of validation, the 2012 Council Recommendation identifies four distinct phases:

(a) IDENTIFICATION of an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
(b) DOCUMENTATION of an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning
(c) ASSESSMENT of an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning
(d) CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of qualifications, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.

“These phases are mixed and balanced in different ways, reflecting the particular purpose of each validation arrangement. When working towards a formal qualification, the robustness and credibility of the assessment stage are crucial. In other cases, for example in relation to voluntary work, more emphasis is given to identification and documentation, less to formal assessment and certification. However, the four phases are likely to be present in all validation arrangements.” (European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning 2015, p. 15)

When reading this analysis, the reader should consider the diversity of the legal framework and conditions at the European level as well as the possible difference in the approaches and practice adopted at the providers’ level.

The AVA consortium defines disadvantaged groups as:

- Disabled people
- Low-skilled
- Unemployed
- Low-skilled people in remote areas
- People at the risk of poverty
- Migrants with one or more of the above mentioned criteria
- +50 in combination with one or more of the above mentioned criteria.

Many of the countries do not have a specific focus on disadvantaged groups but focus in general on *citizens*.





## 2 Cross-thematic analysis by key-concepts

In this chapter a cross-thematic perspective on validation practices is developed by addressing each of the three key-concepts as they are analytically met by the respondents.

### 2.1 Permeability

The definition, used for permeability of validation processes and results, the AVA consortium would like to use is the following:

*Validation processes must be coherent, transparent and legitimate i.e. carried out with the use of validation structure, methods, tools, criteria and standards which make clear for the candidate the purpose, the progress, outcome and benefit and which provide results that are recognised as valid and reliable by users – both within formal education and by employers.*

The concept of permeability could be structured by using the following terms:

- a. Design of coherent and well-structured system
- b. Use of legitimate standards and criteria
- c. Recognition about validation and its wider benefits for the society
- d. Cooperation with stakeholders and social partners as well as across sectors and among institutions.

#### **a. Design of coherent and well-structured system**

There is a common agreement about a need to develop validation process as coherent, transparent and structured. Respondents are divided in two when it comes to define their own systems: half of them seem of evaluate it a coherent and good-structured and half of them not. In general they believe that there some room for improvement in both cases and they welcome the initiative of the AVA project in getting suggestions from their perspective.

Some respondents are focusing only on the identification and documentation as the validation stages that the non-formal learning operators offer. And motivate it the following way: *“Learning in non-formal education sector is built up so that it supports and encourages learner to use the acquired knowledge and skills for RPL processes”*.

Whichever system the national regulation establishes, it is fundamental that the intelligibility between a full and a partial validation process is assured. A partial validation process doesn't lead necessarily to a fragmented one: if the arrangement foresees or facilitates cooperation among validation actors as well as counselling and guidance services, a coherent path is assured for the candidate (see below).

When validation is embedded in the formal educational system, it is sometimes challenging to access validation services. (i.e. not enough study places, money etc. to get access to education and through that to validation.)

#### **b. Use of legitimate standards and criteria**

The majority of respondents declare to use standards and criteria that are nationally legitimate and widely recognised. It is mentioned that standards, methods and tools are: E-portfolios, discussions, reading certificates, etc. however few are describing specific methods and instruments for disadvantaged groups.

Many respondents make good use of the EU tools for documentation purposes (i.e. Europass and Youthpass). However, some of them state that they are not always accepted. A critique made to those tools is that they are not flexible enough (IE and HE).

In the assessment stage candidates' non-formal learning outcomes are distinguished in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. However, in many countries the discussion on what can be recognised as learning outcomes is still highly controversial among validation stakeholders (i.e. IT).



EU Credit systems as NQF and ECVET are generally regarded applicable also for the non-formal learning outcome. However, critical remarks are made to the linear structure of NQF's. This is regarded problematic as learning is not linear. This, together with the relegation of more mundane functions to the lower levels of NQF's (define, describe, etc.), is seen as elitist and it contributes to the binary division of educational opportunity along class lines (IE). As phrased by one of the respondents: *"Unifying the validation at European level must have the idiosyncrasies of each country and each culture"*.

Examples of methods and tools for alternative validation structures are mentioned as:

- ❖ Self-evaluation – test by FACTS standardized model; CELF, results being signed officially by consultant (on line), profilPASS; life journey, identification of strong life moments, identification of capabilities responding to the life activities.
- ❖ Benchmark certification model and 'Open Badges'.

### **c. Recognition about validation and its wider benefits for the society**

Only in five countries respondents seem to rely on a full recognition of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In the majority of the countries either is not clear to which extent the process is recognised or there is not enough acceptance of it. In quite a few countries respondents even perceive a resistance towards the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The higher education sector is considered to be generally resistant to the process as "some institutions are afraid that the official degree is undermined by this way of accreditation". *"Better acquaintance and acceptance of our validation activities by employers and formal education"* are also asked for by respondents.

### **d. Cooperation with stakeholders and social partners as well as across sectors and among institutions**

The majority of the respondents declare to cooperate with other stakeholders to some extent. However, the cooperation seems most likely when organisations discuss or develop validation practice among actors from the same field, quite rare when with social partners, policy-makers and institutions from the formal sectors.

This lack of cooperation is stated as a problem especially if it hinders the follow-up of the candidates' path (especially in case of partial validation arrangements). Obstacles often arise because actors don't know each other's methods, tools and attitude, being even more problematic when a common understanding of the potential of the process is missing (FI).

To foster the cooperation respondents suggest making the quality standards transparent as well as raising knowledge-level of the opportunities brought by validation (IE and HE). Project-based work at the national level is also proposed as a possible instrument to facilitate such a cooperation and thus mutual trust (IS, DK).

## **2.1.1 Open questions**

A comprehensive list of important factors for securing the permeability of validation processes are identified by respondents and this clearly demonstrates the idea of how to increase transparency, coherence and legitimacy of the validation process. Cross-sectorial and cross-institutional collaboration with the potentials of 'speaking the same language', relying on transparent assessment criteria and standards and preferably also following a national system for validation arrangements are highlighted as important factors for the validation candidate's successful validation result.

Lack of knowledge among the main actors concerning validation potentials; not enough acceptance of validation results by formal education and labour market are clearly obstacles to deal with.



## 2.2. Fragmentation

The definition, used for fragmentation of validation processes and results:

*Not securing coherent and comprehensive processes bears the risk of fragmentation where validation candidates lose orientation and ends up with partial results that do not help them really benefit from their prior learning.*

Respondents state that fragmentation risks are particularly high when there is:

- a. Incoherent and fractional implementation of the validation system
- b. Bureaucratic obstacles
- c. Lack of financial resources
- d. Lack of guidance and training for validation professionals

### a. Incoherent and fractional implementation of the validation system

Half of the countries represented in this analysis are considered to have incoherent and/or fractional implementation of their validation system. In only four countries (NL, FR, PT and RO) some respondents report that there is a correspondence between the organisations' strategies and the national policies.

Different collective labour market agreements and regional differences as well as the competitiveness between institutions that have different practice can increase such fragmentation (NL). Missing regulations are seen as an obstacle for 'one step up'; and likewise the apparent lack of systematic practices, lack of support of the organisation and its administration. These obstacles are crucial for the acceptance of validation as such and especially for the inclusion of disadvantaged groups for achieving the benefit of validation arrangements.

Sometimes inconsistencies in the validation arrangements' implementation are due to the same adult education providers' resistance towards the concepts itself of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. In that regard, fostering a common perception among adult education providers of a same country, at least in terms of potential of the existing regulation and the benefits of the process for the individual is crucial (IE). It is also important that adult education providers develop a sense of ownership of the validation process which can be boosted by an increased involvement in the policy-making on the issue.

### b. Bureaucratic obstacles

Bureaucratic and excessive production of documents is acknowledged in particular by the respondents of five countries (PT, RO, SE, AT and ES). Formal examinations and certifications at the end of the process are considered as not always appropriate as they might be inconsistent with the validation methodology and increase the anxiety of participants (PT).

### c. Lack of financial resources

Respondents from Italy, Portugal, Austria, Sweden and Romania highlight the lack of financial resources as one of the main obstacles to carry out a reliable, high-quality and inclusive validation systems.

### d. Lack of guidance and training for validation professionals

The majority of the respondents who share this information state that in their countries (NL, EE, FR and IE) the provision of guidance and training for validation professionals is available. Instead, in countries like Bulgaria, Germany, Greece and Italy this service is apparently not provided for the non-formal sector. Respondents from Portugal and Romania have controversial opinion on the issue.

## 2.2.1 Open questions

The list of obstacles above stresses the importance of increasing structural, i.e. bureaucratic and financial resources in order to develop appropriate systematic validation procedures for the groups of disadvantaged people. However, from the sector of non-formal learning itself, there seems to be another obstacle in terms of actual resistance towards validation of non-formal learning, as stated: Among teaching staff, an intensive debate exists about the added value as it is seen as a danger to "formalize the informal".



## 2.3 Inclusion

The definition, used for inclusion due to validation processes and results:

*To make sure – in any respect – that all citizens, especially the disadvantaged groups, are given the opportunity to benefit from validation of non-formal and informal learning in order to increase their participation in lifelong learning and for their access to labour market.*

In order to foster make the validation systems more inclusive the partners suggest to put in place:

- a. Awareness raising activities
- b. Inclusion strategies at the national and institutional levels
- c. Clarity of the purpose for the organisation and for the individual
- d. Development of guidance and counselling paths for the candidates

### **a. Awareness raising activities**

There is still too little knowledge about validation among the European citizens. There is a necessity to introduce more visibility to this subject, targeting especially the groups that come from disadvantaged groups and thus might need validation the most.

The majority of the respondents declare to carry out information and sensitisation activities, but many of them deplore a lack of specific focus on disadvantaged groups.

Particular attention should be paid in providing a better understanding of what the non-formal sector can do in that regard, perhaps marketing better the different opportunities adult education providers could offer. A particular target for such activities should be the policy-makers and the labour market actors (NO).

A respondent for an example declare: *“It is sometimes difficult to get into contact with the responsible stakeholders and policy makers and there is a low understanding among employers.”*

### **b. Inclusion strategies at the national and institutional levels**

As a problematic factor for inclusion it should only not be considered the lack of properly addressed information to the disadvantaged groups, but also the lack of learner centred- approach in the strategies adopted at the national and institutional level. A clear analysis about the candidates, their needs and purpose is key to make the validation arrangement inclusive. However, the majority of respondents declare that a specific focus on disadvantaged groups doesn't exist in their countries and only few of them are satisfied with the attention paid by their institutions to this target group.

Some respondents mention interesting examples and practice adopted to make the validation activities inclusive and allow the candidate to move 'one step up' in his/her life. One of these is to develop ECVET pilots to validate micro-units for disadvantaged groups which can help to simplify the process and thus make it more accessible. Another interested practice is to create individual plans or propaedeutic course prior to the start of the validation process, in order to support the candidates in a tailored-made way.

Practice of organisations' cooperation implies important inclusion potentials for disadvantaged peoples' benefit of the validation arrangement. The more a provider cooperates with social partners, employers and educational institutions, the more candidates see their chances to continue their educational development or to enter the labour market increased.

Especially for migrants or roma people, *“It is necessary to recognise the non-formal and informal learning validation through several channels and also in these cases where the documental proof doesn't exist”*.

Accessibility can also be hindered by geographical reasons (AT, RO and PT).

Providing real benefits in terms of lifelong learning and working outcomes including financial incentives is mentioned as a possible way to increase the interests of the potential candidates.

### **c. Clarity of the purpose for the organisation and for the individual**

Not only criteria and standards need to be transparent for the candidate, but also the purpose of the organisation in regard to the validation process. Only a minority of respondents (DK, EE, FI and FR) state that this is the case in their organisations.



In order to make the validation arrangement inclusive and effective, all its areas need to be developed and implemented in a transparent way. A respondent suggests creating databases of competences easily accessible both from the candidates and the other actors interested in their validation process.

The candidates themselves should be also guided to understand their aims in order to avoid disappointments, mistrust and disengagement with the association. As stated by a respondent: *“We validate the participants not formally, especially because of their reality – they are not interested much in formal validation. For the need of projects, we do self-validation and reflection”.*

#### **d. Development of guidance and counselling paths for the candidates**

Many respondents believe that guidance and counselling make clear the benefits of validation for the individual and support him or her in understanding own needs and interests and a quarter of them make concrete use of these tools. In Romania and Ireland there seem to be controversial opinions on the matter. In general validation providers should make sure that the candidate is better informed on the focus and take responsibility for making his or her own competence visible. This can happen by drafting an individual validation plan which describes the stages for the individual, including guidance needs. Some respondents are focusing on alternative structure, methods and tools used by non-formal learning operators as important for inclusion as life journey, identification of strong life moments, and identification of capabilities responding to the life activities – collecting, categorising, and responding to the list of competences. All these tools should be planned and used together with the candidate in order for him/her to feel the ownership of both the validation process and its outcomes.

### **2.2.1 Open questions**

Looking at the organisations’ validation offers, there is an obvious lack of strategy for disadvantaged groups whether this could be specifically addressing this target group or more indirectly including this – in reality much differentiated – group.

It is expressed by a Romanian respondent, that, though a specific strategy is not defined, in reality the target group of disadvantaged people is highly represented as users of the organisation’s validation offer.

The questions to be considered are:

Is it a necessity to express directly and concrete a specific strategy for disadvantaged groups?

Which are the potentials – or the opposite? – by addressing disadvantaged people as a special target group?

Does a specific validation strategy for the target group of disadvantaged imply more, potential, inclusive aspects for targeting these people in term of a approach, methods, tools, information, cross-institutional and cross-sectoral collaboration, a.o than would be the case, when not highlighting (or stigmatizing) this group as special?



### 3. Main recommendations

Based on the previous highlighted factors of importance for permeable, non-fragmented and inclusive validation practices – and specifically targeted groups of disadvantaged people, the following recommendations are listed as they appear from the perspective of the authors of the horizontal analysis:

- ❖ Properly addressed internal and external information, i.e. internal to professionals who carry out the validation and external to stakeholders and collaboration partners.
- ❖ The validation provider should have a validation strategy for disadvantaged people in order to match with appropriate validation approach, methods and tools.
- ❖ A structured validation process that makes the entire validation process and the individual stages in the process visible for the individual.
- ❖ Accessibility and transparency should be increased, especially taking into account the groups of disadvantaged people.
- ❖ Development of collaboration between central stakeholders would increase reliability and trust for the validation results as well as ensure the inclusion of the target groups of disadvantaged.
- ❖ Systematic development and maintenance of Quality Assurance (QA) of the competences of validation professionals in non-formal learning settings support a holistic approach to validation of non-formal learning among the groups of disadvantaged people
- ❖ Systematic procedures for cross-sectorial and cross-institutional QA collaboration can increase the perspective on the target group of the disadvantaged as a visible and core target group for validation activities to support moving one step up.
- ❖ It is necessary to establish development and research projects with specific focus on how to enhance the contribution of the validation results for non-formal learning in the *step up* perspective.

#### 3.1. Specific recommendations related to cross-sectorial and cross-institutional cooperation

Cross-sectorial and cross-institutional cooperation are regarded the most crucial factors to achieve permeability, which allow the individual to progress both in terms of education and entrance to the labour market. To succeed in this, the respondents suggest:

- ❖ To increase the knowledge of the educational and employment stakeholders on the potentials and rules of the national validation system in order to overcome the mutual resistance on accepting its outcomes.
- ❖ To foster the dialogue between the validation stakeholders in order to develop a common language on validation, especially when it comes to recognising the different types of benefits that the process can bring to the individuals.



- ❖ To develop standard criteria for the institutions working on validation, through a systematic and recognised documentation about the validation process and about the organisation carrying it out.
- ❖ To build mutual trust between different institutions and sectors by fostering the quality of the process through putting in place methods of quality control and follow up on learning development following the validation.
- ❖ To increase the use of the existing tools and to study their transferability to different contexts.
- ❖ To develop a more open and comprehensive validation system that could cover all educational sectors and include a bigger number of professions.
- ❖ To secure that the providers have adequate competences and offer regular in-service training on validation.



## 4. The four thematic cases

### 4.1 Introduction to the section

The four cases aim to illustrate how practices fulfill - or on the contrary face difficulties in terms of - the three key concepts for the AVA survey.

They underline the diversity of validation policies and different practices for validation in non-formal education institutions and describe possibilities, obstacles and dilemmas of validation of non-formal and informal learning for candidates coming from disadvantaged backgrounds from an adult education provider. As the survey results demonstrate, many of the countries included in the survey do not have a specific focus on disadvantaged groups, but focus on citizens in general.

The four cases represent the following themes:

1. Best practice – a model for a structured and coherent validation activity in non-formal settings.
2. Validation as a project activity not anchored in national validation policies and national validation practices.
3. VPL in alternatives routes, methods and approaches.
4. VLP of non-formal learning outcomes resulting in 'one step up'.

The cases are constructed on the basis of original data from the survey results, but also by putting together perspectives, aspects and facts from the extensive data material.

As an introduction to each case, VPL aspects are listed in order to point out the main characteristics for the reader.

### 4.2 Case 1: Best practice model for a structured, systematic and coherent validation arrangement

The main characteristics of this case are the following:

- It follows a structured process, characterized by coherence and transparency.
- It provides a clear purpose and task for the non-formal provider/organisation.
- It is carried out by professionals who are aware of the steps in the VPL process, including either only the first two phases of identification and documentation or all the four stages.
- The VPL arrangement and process concerns raising visibility of the VPL offer for the individual citizen.
- It is specifically targeted to disadvantaged groups – with the recognition of the differentiation of this overall target group.
- Non-formal learning outcomes are distinguished in terms of criteria and concepts in accordance with EQF / NQF and EU currencies in order to ensure 'one step up' for the VPL candidate.
- It is carried out in cooperation partners from the labour market, education institutions and other stakeholders.

#### 4.2.1 The case

The organisation follows a national validation system, which corresponds to the organisation's strategy and policy. The tools and methods are developed or adapted with a specific focus on the disadvantaged groups, e.g. "to identify life experience and temporal location, organisation of the candidate's idea". The target





group includes the disadvantaged, characterized as unemployed, lacking formal education, immigrants, young people and people over the age of fifty.

The organisation provides a full validation; the offer is described as well-known among the stakeholders. It finds validation offers transparent with regard to the goal and structure as well as to the responsibilities of the validation process.

The organisation offers a four stage validation structure; it also uses standards and criteria for assessment and certification which are considered transparent for the candidate and recognised as valid and reliable by the labour market and formal education. EU transparency tools are used for documentation, while national assessment criteria, linked to NQF, are applied for the assessment. EU credit systems are regarded applicable for validation of non-formal learning outcomes. An example of it is the ECVET system, which actually improves the modularity of the training and thus makes it easier to recognise non-formal and informal learning outcomes.

The organisation uses standards and criteria for assessment and certification which are considered transparent for the candidate and recognised as valid and reliable by labour market and formal education. Non-formal learning outcomes are distinguished in terms of knowledge, skills and competences.

The organisation reports that guidance resources are available for validation professionals and competence requirements have been agreed on at the national level. Guidance and counselling resources are also available for the validation candidate, supporting the individual in making the validation purpose clear as well as in the understanding of own interests and particular needs:

*“Draft of individual validation plan describes the stage for the individual, including guidance needs. The individual plan is carried out together with the candidate. This makes the candidates more aware of the focus and helps them take responsibility for making their own competence visible.”*

The organisation emphasizes the importance of training the staff and continuous development of their skills, especially among those responsible for guidance and assessment.

The organisation cooperates with stakeholders and partners at the cross-sectorial and cross-institutional level in order to implement laws and strategies for validation. Likewise, stakeholders are involved in discussions of development and/or in the operation of validation arrangement. The types of stakeholders contacted and involved in cooperation include: government associations, ministries of Education, Labour, Social affairs and social partners - all relevant and supportive of organisations’ development and operation of validation arrangement for the target groups.

The organisation’s entire cooperation network is extensive, covering cooperation with the underprivileged organisations for development of low-threshold tools and cooperation with the labour market administration, companies and schools that the organisations consider beneficial.

#### **4.3 Case 2: Validation as ‘a project activity’**

The main characteristics of this case are the following:

- The validation structure is ‘alternative’ and only applied internally in the organisation’s practice (not anchored in national validation policy and validation practices)
- Project-based work can stimulate non-formal adult education providers to undertake validation activities.
- Due to discontinuous project funding the validation offers might represent separate and ‘free standing’ initiatives.



- Projects are more suitable to adapt to the specific needs of a territory or a determinate period and also address differentiated target groups of candidates (particularly important when targeting the diverse groups of the disadvantaged)
- Some organisations succeed in working with long-term development of validation approach and methods despite the short-term funding.
- One of the challenges is to achieve a more comprehensive and long-term strategy and holistic approach to validation.

#### 4.3.1 The case

The validation offer in a project setting is subordinate to the overall project aim, frames and resources. When the project aims at a specific target group, such as immigrants, low-skilled and handicapped people, it addresses not only the need to enter the labour market or start an educational path, but also the necessity to build up self-esteem, personal development and empowerment. Validation activities form an important part of this overall process regardless the timeframe imposed by the project-based work.

The organisation depends on regular project funding, typically ESF. As over the years the project organisation takes part in a wide range of shifting networks with project partners, stakeholders and umbrella organisations, it builds a comprehensive knowledge base for the development of validation activities. Though based on project funding, the project organisation succeeds in working on long-term goals, thus developing the validation practice. In turn, the specific focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged is reflected in methods, tools and guidance resources, appropriate for the target group. This development work reflects cross-national as well as national/regional perspectives of the validation approach matched with an appropriate use of methods and tools for the target groups of disadvantaged people.

That said, as the organisation's key tasks are short-term projects in shifting contexts, it needs to navigate following the actual project objective, which tends to coincide with a systematic and continuous development of a validation strategy as the primary objective. Consequently, the use of methods and tools rely on what is decided – and possible – according to the project focus and resources.

Similarly, the project does not follow a national validation system, but has to operate within an EU context. This means that, due to a project decision - or obligation - to use EU tools for documentation of prior learning, Europass and Youthpass are considered usable but not optimal for the specific needs of the target group in the national context.

The validation arrangement, as part of the overall project activities, is based on an alternative system and does not include all four stages. With the strong focus on building self-esteem and empowerment of the target group, the validation arrangement prioritizes activities for the identification stage. The project organisation therefore provides intensive guidance as an integral part of the identification process by developing a specific approach and competences for guidance which goes beyond the simple use in single and short-term projects. The validation professionals are strongly committed to the projects' empowerment strategy and they are very focused on the benefits of validation for the target group. Sometimes, the approach to validation of prior learning is expressed in a cautious attitude towards the formalization aspect of validation of non-formal learning, though also recognizing the potentials for accessing an educational path or the labour market.

As certification is not included in the validation offer, the validation results – forming mainly identification and documentation of prior learning – tend to remain the end-result for the user and hence a further assessment and accreditation are normally not directly supported as part of the project.



## 4.4 Case 3: Alternative routes in methods and approaches

Some respondents focus on alternative structures, methods and tools used by non-formal learning operators as important for inclusion. The use of such structures brings the following conclusions:

- The linear structure of NQF's is problematic, as the learning process itself is not linear.
- The concepts are not always in accordance with the concepts used in formal education or by the labour market.
- Benchmark certification model and 'Open Badges' are often used methods and tools.

It also raises two questions:

- How to describe the competences learned in non-formal learning settings as valid in a coherent validation process where assessment often takes place in formal learning educations?
- Does the language used in assessment tools match the competences learned in non-formal education?

### 4.4.1 The case

The organisation is active in validation policy and practice, but does not follow a national validation system or regulations for validation at sectorial or regional level.

In order to ensure the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, the organisation considers a dynamic and flexible approach to validation activities as a necessity. It is now searching for a new road to improve the use of validation for a broader purpose than the one opened up by the national strategy.

The organisation has critical remarks with regard to the mainstreaming of validation seen as a linear structure, especially the EU frameworks such as EQF / NQF, considering that the learning process is not linear. Moreover, NQF is perceived as too rigid and discouraging for those adults who should be entering at lower levels in NQF. Finally, knowledge, skills and competences are described on the basis of criteria from the formal education system.

In general, EU credit systems are not regarded as applicable for the validation of non-formal learning outcomes, as they largely focus on competences relevant for the labour market and the formal educational system and not on what the institution considers important to identify and assess. The institution's main purpose is the candidates' empowerment. To achieve so, the organisation is trying to develop methods and tools for an alternative validation structure, with self-evaluation and identification of capabilities responding to the life skills.

Due to that, the organisation has difficulties in the collaboration with the formal learning system. The non-formal learning environment does not validate the participants formally. The experience is that the participants are not interested in formal validation, especially the disadvantaged groups.

## 4.5 Case 4: 'One step up'

The main characteristics of this case are:

- The possibility to make validation in non-formal learning institutions more relevant to individual learners/citizens, especially those from disadvantaged groups.
- A support in identifying, documenting, presenting and promoting their full range of knowledge, skills and competences throughout their life span
- The transfer and accumulation of learning within and across institutional borders
- The lack of trust and common language overcome by improving dialogue between stakeholders.
- Cross-institutional cooperation enhanced by the development of a quality control and the follow-up of learning development as a service for learners.



#### 4.5.1 The case

The organisation carries out a validation arrangement especially targeting migrants. The organisation has developed its own VPL structure, which does not follow national laws and regulations or a national validation system. The organisation pays much attention to the quality assurance of its validation arrangement which, among others, is reflected in the professional competence profile requirements, education and competence development. The professionals are encouraged to take part in validation networks, national and international.

Due to well-known obstacles that keep migrants from entering the labour market or getting access to education, the organisation has developed a pre-VPL course, clearly based on national VPL regulations. The organisation distributes information about the validation arrangement, which, among others, includes a folder, directly targeting migrants. The information is broadly distributed by the organisation in order to widen the reach of information to the target group. It also has the additional benefit of gathering a broader stakeholder commitment and interest in migrants' prior learning outcomes and inclusion in society. There is a growing interest in the validation offer and the pre-course, especially among migrant women, which can be explained as the result of both a more direct promotion and by women's internal communication and network. There is an estimated increase of about 30-40 % participants per year.

The pre-VPL course is considered to be of crucial importance for the candidates' recognition of own competences, which is supported by intensive guidance and a six-step so-called '*participation ladder*' that guides their move through social activation towards inclusion in society. The argument for allocating resources to this pre-stage is to help migrant women '*to crack the codes*' in terms of the labour market, language learning and behavior. Having completed the VPL pre-course, the participants move on to the VPL arrangement that leads to a partial validation, including identification, documentation and assessment. The red thread from identification activities to the following validation stages is ensured so that the individual participant is active in the process of becoming more and more precise and clear on his or her validation purpose. This is secured by guidance and counselling, as well as a relevant approach and methods. The organisation has good results with the use of EU transparency tools for documentation. At the same time, while in the assessment stage the participants' non-formal learning outcomes are clearly distinguished in terms of knowledge, skills and competences, and the credit standards and criteria are linked to the NQF, participants' validation results might not always be accepted within the labour market and the formal education system especially when going out from the community the organisation is operating in.

As the organisation clearly recognizes, for the participants to succeed, a strong cross-sectorial and cross-institutional cooperation is crucial. The organisation cooperates within an extensive network of partners; for example, assessment and certification entail cooperation with a wide range of employers and public institutions. The organisation aims to not only provide a validation offer for providers, but also to promote a better understanding of validation as well as intercultural learning for employers and for the whole society.