

OBESSU Position Paper on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (NFIL)

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), represents school students in Europe since 1975 and has ever since been advocating for participatory, inclusive and quality education for all. As an organisation representing learners in Europe, OBESSU is concerned with the proper implementation of validation policies. We believe these as central to fostering the development of key competences and skills to become active citizens and contributors to society. Over the past decades we have witnessed a growing debate on the needs for economic growth and to supply workforce for the labour market.

At the same time, we have lived through a global pandemic which forced education systems to reflect on their innovation and resilience. Learners throughout Europe found themselves learning in new ways and new digital spaces, fostering, among others, more informal learning and independent learning. For this reason, among others, we believe that validation could and should play a role in formal education systems, both in general and vocational learning, as a tool to foster a holistic vision to lifelong learning and more inclusion and accessibility.

Back in 2012, the European Council adopted a [Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#), which established a **set of guidelines** for Member States to develop and implement validation arrangements by 2018. Since then, [Cedefop](#) and the European Commission have been collecting and analysing data on the state of play of validation across Europe, through the [European inventory on validation](#) and the [European qualifications framework \(EQF\) database](#), while at the moment of writing the position paper, the existing [European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning](#) are being reviewed and expected to be soon updated.

Having in mind the Council Recommendation on a [European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#) (June 2022), the third version of the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning¹ (May 2023) and on the occasion of the [European Year of Skills](#) (2023), OBESSU prepared this Position Paper (*building on the previous [OBESSU Position Paper on the promotion and validation of non-formal education and informal learning, published in 2011](#) and [the OBESSU Position Paper on the European Year of Skills](#) to address the need to change current practices and perspectives in a way that puts learners at the centre.*

Throughout this paper, **we address some of the current challenges and solutions and propose the learners' perspective on this crucial topic for education and training policies in Europe.**

¹ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/3093>



Transition within and beyond education: challenges and opportunities

Looking into the final report published by the European Commission in 2020² it is clearly stated that *"the Council Recommendations stemmed from the need to ensure that European citizens can have all their learning experiences (formal, non-formal, informal) recognised and valued as a way to address a set of economic and social challenges created by a fast changing world of work characterised by technological development and occupational flexibility.*

VNFIL can generate benefits at the level of individuals (enhanced employability, career prospects, better wages, better access to formal education etc.) and of the economy (better skilled population and better skills match on the labour market, etc.) thus contributing to more inclusive societies."

Nevertheless, according to UNESCO, lifelong learning covers formal, non-formal and informal learning in all settings of study, work, social and community engagement and leisure. However, non-formal and informal learning is often ignored and undervalued³, something we experience as students and school leaders in our everyday life.

According to the European Commission,⁴ validation is a complex process which experiences a rather critical state of play due to the lack of coordination and coherence between Member States' validation systems, characterised by sectoral (e.g., sectoral skills passports) rather than transversal initiatives. The lack of government policy and frameworks has a strong impact on recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which in turn leads to discretionary recognition and further complex recognition procedures for education and training providers.

This type of incoherence impacts learners during and across their learning path, as observed also by the European Parliament's comparative study on higher education entrance qualifications and exams in Europe⁵ which states that *"the failure to recognise prior learning beyond secondary school qualifications (skills, competencies and qualifications of non-traditional learners) is a particular challenge to equity in access to higher education"*.⁶ In terms of school curricula, this incoherence impacts other processes like the need for incorporating subjects that focus on transversal skills.

Transversal skills are an implicit part of the existing validation and guidance processes⁷, being relevant across different domains and contexts, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy. Thus, VET school systems are still in need of a validation process which supports and recognises skills which are increasingly in demand in civic and social life, as well as in the 21st century workplace.

² <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ea175fa5-ca31-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

³ <https://uil.unesco.org/biennium-report-2014-2015-unesco-institute-lifelong-learning>

⁴ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ea175fa5-ca31-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

⁵ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/529057/IPOL-CULT_ET%282014%29529057_EN.pdf

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018SC0170>

⁷ <https://www.transvalproject.eu/about-transval-eu/the-project/>



Adding up to the policy divide, as observed by the 2018 Report by the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning⁸, there are significant differences in the use of validation between the education and training area and the labour market and third sector areas. Years later, we still observe the same need for cooperation and the need to create 'bridges' and ensure that outcomes of validation that take place in one sector/area can be used in another.

According to the study on Obstacles to Recognition of Skills and Qualifications⁹ commissioned by the European Commission in 2016, individuals are often unaware of the opportunities that exist to have their qualifications recognised; of the skills that they possess and that could be recognised; or of the cases in which recognition is not necessary. Differences in education and training systems between countries and information often being available in only one language contribute to this lack of awareness.

For graduates that choose not to continue their education path, recognition procedures can be lengthy, which means incurring extra living costs before being entitled access to employment. For the OECD, quick recognition procedures are a key lesson country need to adopt. Even though most OECD members have fixed the maximum admissible processing time for recognition of foreign qualifications in legislation, the duration varies greatly across countries, education sectors and professions (from 30 days in countries such as the Czech Republic and Latvia, to 160 days in Wallonia - Belgium).

Individuals who benefit the most from the educational schemes offered to continue learning - such as validation schemes that are mainly targeted at those with lower skills and/or who dropped out of education without a secondary education diploma - are those who already have stronger educational backgrounds.

Last, but not least, we cannot fail to mention the importance of validation policies in the framework of volunteering and activism. As active citizens and practitioners of democracy, we believe that being active in society in ways such as student activism should be recognised, not punished. However, in most countries and at school level, school student organising is still punished instead of fostered and harnessed. The amount of competences and skills developed through organising, however, are a true asset to the individuals but also to their communities and to society overall.

Validation of NFIL - Enabling Lifelong Learning pathways

Acknowledging the challenges and experiences in relation to **Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL)**, OBESSU outlines a set of policy demands that need to be addressed in order to improve VNFIL - including **designing and implementing validation policies and practices**, while also key elements as part of the need of **reforming and harmonising regional and national VNFIL systems and practices across the 4 validation stages** known as identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The policy demands are mainly directed towards decision makers and stakeholders relevant, yet not only subjected to **all subdivisions of secondary education, including General Lower Secondary Education, Vocational Lower Secondary Education, General Upper Secondary Education, Vocational Upper Secondary Education, Post-Secondary non-Tertiary Education.**

⁸ https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf

⁹ COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.



OBESSU demands:

- Member States and the EU institutions to invest more resources and opportunities for cooperation that can help validation and recognition of NFIL as outlined in the Council Recommendation of 2012, which calls for the development of national frameworks and procedures that enable the identification, documentation, assessment, and certification of NFIL outcomes.
- Co-shaping the recognition process with the whole school community and the different parties involved, including external stakeholders and actors in the processes of transition (cross-sectorial and multi-level education). This implies fostering a culture of recognition that values NFIL as a legitimate and meaningful form of learning, and that involves learners, educators, parents, employers, civil society organisations and other relevant actors in the design, delivery, and evaluation of validation mechanisms,
- Making sure that the provided Non-Formal and Informal Learning meets quality standards and validating it, which means ensuring that the NFIL activities follow quality standards and criteria that are transparent, reliable and valid, while at the same time align to a curriculum which is also more adapted to the times we live in (see [Paper on curricula for the XXI century](#)).
- Ensuring that validation methods, especially assessment, are appropriate for the nature and context of NFIL, and that they respect the diversity and autonomy of learners. Assessment should allow the engagement of different actors (self-assessment, peer-assessment, external assessment) using different methods (portfolio, interview, observation, test) depending on the type and level of validation (formative or summative; partial or full; internal or external). Assessment should be fair, consistent and transparent, and should provide feedback and guidance for further learning. Assessment should be carried out in the spirit of development and not performance evaluation.
- Validating and recognising activism with measures like developing a credit system, which aims to acknowledge and reward the learning that takes place through active participation in social movements, campaigns or initiatives that address societal challenges or promote positive change. A credit system could be based on the recognition of learning outcomes, competencies or hours of engagement, depending on the purpose and scope of the validation. Such a credit system should be developed together with school student unions and other stakeholders in the school community.
- Investment in hard and soft policy, which means allocating adequate resources (financial, human, material) and creating supportive conditions (legal, institutional, organisational) for the implementation of validation policies and practices. This also means ensuring coordination and cooperation among different policy sectors (education, employment, social affairs) and levels (local, regional, national, European) to ensure coherence and complementarity of validation initiatives.
- The notion that validation policies must take place in a public education system. In the current system of constant commodification of education, public policy actors must pay attention to ensuring the full accessibility of validation pathways to everyone, regardless of their background.



- Personal, professional and community based impact - A pathway where the system builds processes that aim at achievements that have long-term and societal benefits. Such processes would include for example
 - a) the analysis and evaluation on the effects and outcomes of validation policies and practices on the individual, collective and societal level, and b)
 - measuring the impact of validation on learners' motivation, self-esteem, employability, mobility, civic engagement and social inclusion. It also includes assessing the impact of validation on educators' professional development.



Definition of Concepts: Supporting the development of a common understanding on the concepts and settings addressed within the paper

What is non formal education and what is informal education and how do they complete the work done on Formal Education and its settings?

Non-formal learning takes place outside formal learning environments but within some kind of organisational framework. It arises from the learner's conscious decision to master a particular activity, skill or area of knowledge and is thus the result of intentional effort. But it need not follow a formal syllabus or be governed by external accreditation and assessment.

Non-formal learning typically takes place in community settings: swimming classes for small children, sports clubs of various kinds for all ages, reading groups, debating societies, amateur choirs and orchestras, and so on. Some non-formal learning arrangements become increasingly formal as learners become more proficient; one thinks, for example, of graded exams in music and other performing arts. Adult migrants engage in non-formal language learning when they participate in organised activities that combine the learning and use of their target language with the acquisition of a particular skill or complex of knowledge.

Informal learning takes place outside schools and colleges and arises from the learner's involvement in activities that are not undertaken with a learning purpose in mind. Informal learning is involuntary and an inescapable part of daily life; for that reason, it is sometimes called experiential learning. Learning that is formal or non-formal is partly intentional and partly incidental: when we consciously pursue any learning target we cannot help learning things that are not part of that target. Informal learning, however, is exclusively incidental.¹⁰

Non-formal education refers to planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum. Non-formal education is what happens in places such as youth organisations, sports clubs and drama and community groups where young people meet, for example, to undertake projects together, play games, discuss, go camping, or make music and drama. Non-formal education achievements are usually difficult to certify, even if their social recognition is increasing.

Informal education refers to a lifelong learning process, whereby each individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in his or her own environment and from daily experience. People learn from family and neighbours, in the marketplace, at the library, at art exhibitions, at work and through playing, reading and sports activities. The mass media are a very important medium for informal education, for instance through plays and film, music and songs, televised debates and documentaries. Learning in this way is often unplanned and unstructured.¹¹

What makes non formal education non formal and informal learning?

¹⁰ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants/formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

¹¹ www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/definitions



Non-Formal Education and opportunities of non-formal and informal learning takes place across the lifespan in different settings, involving educators and learners, while happening also between peers.

When it comes to NFE specifically, it has evolved into a specific and successful type of education with the following characteristics:

- Voluntary: learners participate in NFE activities through their own compulsion.
- Intentional: activities are designed to reach set aims.
- Participative: young people participate actively in the design and implementation of the learning programmes.
- Conscious: the learners are aware that they are learning.
- Process-oriented: what happens during the learning process is of great importance as it allows the learner to choose what s/he wants to learn and achieve.¹²

European dimension and perspectives - Framework of cooperation, exchanging good practices and fostering a more coherent understanding

In the **Lisbon Treaty**, education is dealt with under the heading of "supporting, coordinating or complementary actions". In this section, legally binding acts can be adopted, but direct harmonisation of national laws is not permitted. The EU has only limited competence in the area of education policy. In fact, it can contribute to the development of quality education in the member states. Such incentive measures can be decided for EU education policy by a qualified majority in the Council and co-decision with the European Parliament, see Article 165-166 TFEU, previously Article 149 TEC.¹³

The policy framework, in regards to education and training at European level, is mainly outlined within set resolutions, recommendations, action plans and monitoring processes that are agreed upon by the different institutions. The Recommendation of December 2012 can be regarded as the beginning of a new stage for validation in Europe. It signals an enhanced political commitment, calling all Member States to establish by 2018 arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning¹⁴. The European Union has been supporting the development and implementation of validation policies and practices in its member states through various initiatives and instruments.

Some of the main EU policies and actions plans related to validation of non-formal and informal learning are:

- The **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**, which is a common reference framework that links national qualifications systems and levels to make qualifications more readable and comparable across Europe. The EQF encourages the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes and their inclusion in national qualifications frameworks.
- The **Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012)**, which provides common European principles and guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It calls on member states to establish national arrangements for validation by

¹² https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/0290-11_Policy_Paper_NFE_QA_FINAL.pdf

¹³ <http://en.euabc.com/word/323>

¹⁴ <https://www.cairn.info/revue-journal-of-international-mobility-2016-1-page-9.htm?ref=doi>



2018, to enable individuals to have their learning outcomes validated and to obtain a full or partial qualification.

- The **European Skills Agenda (2020)**, which is a strategic framework that aims to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness in the EU. It sets out 12 actions to support skills development, including the promotion of validation of non-formal and informal learning as a way to recognise and value skills acquired in different settings.
- The **Europass framework**, which is a set of tools and services that help individuals to communicate their skills, qualifications and experiences across Europe. It includes the Europass portfolio, which allows individuals to document their learning outcomes from formal, non-formal and informal settings, and the Europass digital credentials, which are secure online certificates that can be used to validate skills and qualifications.
- The **European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)**, which is a technical framework that facilitates the transfer, recognition and accumulation of learning outcomes achieved in different contexts. It supports the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes by providing a common language and methodology for describing and documenting them.
- The **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, which is the main EU funding instrument for investing in people's skills, employment and social inclusion. It supports the implementation of validation policies and practices at national, regional and local levels, by co-financing projects that aim to develop, test or scale up innovative approaches to validation.

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