

The process of validation of non-formal and informal learning

Specification of terminology and the status of debate in the German-speaking countries



SILVIA ANNEN
Dr., Research associate in the
“Commercial Service
Occupations in the Media
Industry” Division at BIBB



MARKUS BRETSCHNEIDER
Research associate in the
“Industrial, Technical and
Scientific Occupations”
Division at BIBB

On 20 December 2012, the Council of the European Union issued a “Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning”, which calls upon the individual member states to introduce relevant regulations by the year 2018. The Recommendation states the main elements of a validation process. The present article begins by outlining the background and intentions of these endeavours before moving on to specify the terminology used to describe the individual elements in more detail. Finally and by way of example, a brief consideration is undertaken of national developments with regard to the implementation of the Recommendation whereby particular attention is paid to the individual stages of the process.

Initial situation

As a result of the promotion of lifelong learning processes over the past two decades, increasing educational policy focus has been placed on non-formal and informal learning as forms of learning that have equal status with formal learning. The impetuses set by the European Union enable a development to be traced in this regard (cf. GUTSCHOW 2010, pp. 16 ff.), and it is clearly discernible that strategic considerations at the macro level are increasingly leading to specific actions at the micro level. An orientation towards learning outcomes was key to the introduction of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning in April 2008 and of the German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (DQR) in May 2013. Although the DQR’s eight reference levels have thus far “only” been aligned to qualifications acquired within the scope of formal learning processes, there are prospective plans that the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning processes will be included. The current Recommendation calls upon the EU member states to introduce suitable regulations for validation by 2018 at the latest.

The delineating criteria of the various forms of learning are nature of organisation, purpose and certification (cf. Cedefop 2009). Formal and non-formal learning are characterised by the fact that there is external organisation with regard to learning venues, learning contents and learning times, whereas informal learning takes place via the individual and frequently occurs unknowingly. This

unconscious aspect in particular means that it is necessary to undertake retrospective identification of the individual learning outcomes. Informal learning processes do not usually lead to certification, whereas formal learning is always certified. Non-formal learning also mostly result in certification. These forms of learning also differ with regard to the market value of the certificates acquired, i.e. in terms of the associated entitlements within the educational and employment system.

Functions of validation

As long ago as 2000, the key messages regarding “evaluation of learning” formulated in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning contained the objective “to enhance the status of education by improving the ways in which learning participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated, particularly non-formal and informal learning” (Commission of the European Communities 2000, pp. 18 ff.). Against the background of increasing discontinuities in employment biographies and curricula vitae, the reason given is the “increasing demand for qualified workers and ever more fierce competition for jobs” (ibid.). In the initial documents produced by the European Union to address the issue of non-formal and informal learning, the sole thrust of the argumentation used is the usability of evidence of learning on the labour market. The extended focus of promotion of citizen involvement and broadly based personal

development is not added until a later stage (cf. e.g. Commission of the European Communities 2001, p. 9).

Validation procedures and their central elements

The term validation is understood to mean “a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard” (Council of the European Union 2012, p. 5). Four distinct consecutive phases – identification, documentation, assessment and certification – are also differentiated (cf. box). The aim is for these elements to be used separately or in combined form as individually required. The idea that there is no single ideal pathway for such a process was formulated as early as 2004 in the “Common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning” (cf. Commission of the European Communities 2004).

The stages stated in the Council Recommendation are considered more specifically below, and their significance for the overall process of validation is identified.

Identification

Recognition of learning outcomes, whether of a formal, non-formal or informal nature, initially requires reflective recognition of such outcomes. This fundamental stage of identification can take place within the scope of a “closed system” of defined learning outcomes in a way that is related to pre-stipulated standards. One example of this is

Elements of validation

... The member states should, with a view to offering individuals the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned outside formal education and training – including through mobility experiences – and to make use of that learning for their careers and further learning, and with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity... include, as appropriate, the following elements in arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, whilst allowing each individual to take advantage of any of these, either separately or in combination, in accordance with his/her needs:

- a) Identification (...)
- b) Documentation (...)
- c) Assessment (...)
- d) 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, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate...

(Council of the European Union 2012, p. 3)

the so-called reference occupations, which are used as a benchmark to ascertain the equivalence of qualifications acquired abroad within the framework of the Professional and Vocational Qualifications Assessment Law (BQFG). In contrast to this, however, it is also possible to adopt an “open” approach which is aligned to the biography of an individual and which infers competences on the basis of activities in various areas of life. Both approaches can also be combined, whereby an “open” approach may progress to a “closed system”. The main basis of the nature of identification lies in striving to adopt a summative approach, which later leads to an assessment or even to certification of learning achievements, or a formative approach, which is more strongly aligned to individual self-assurance (cf. also the section “Assessment”). The stage of identification may take place autonomously or with the assistance of third parties.

Documentation

The documentation of learning outcomes is of central importance to their subsequent assessment. Because non-formal learning processes are always externally organised, documentation of such processes can take place via third parties in order to create a certain degree of objectivity via reference to pre-stipulated standards. The documentation of the outcomes of informal learning is considerably more difficult by dint of the fact that such outcomes are, by their very definition, not necessarily intentional. In such cases, it is possible to document “materialised products” which are the result of learning processes. This may, for example, take place in the form of the examination instrument of an “examination product/examination piece”. In such cases, the candidate is given the task of making a product typical to the occupation. This may be, for example, a product manufactured in metal or wood, a computer programme, a marketing concept or product documentation (cf. BIBB Hauptausschuss 2013, p. 19).

Assessment

A clear understanding of the term assessment is important in order to understand the associated institutional arrangements within a validation process (cf. WERQUIN 2007, p. 27). Assessment is essentially a referencing process. Learning outcomes documented are referenced against a specific standard (e.g. a skills or requirements profile) or against certain expectations. Both occupational and educationally related standards may be used, and a variety of methods may be deployed. A differentiation between the *summative* and *formative* forms mentioned above can also be made (cf. COLARDYN/BJÖRNAVOLD 2005, p. 106). Within the scope of the equivalence assessment of qualifications acquired abroad on the basis of the BQFG as referenced

above, the so-called reference occupations form the benchmark or standard.

According to the definition of GNAHS (2003, p. 91), assessments are a form of external evaluation which is recorded in writing and is the result of investigatory procedures that are based on certain standards and reference levels. Assessment is also understood to include self-assessment processes on the part of learners on the basis of their own individual appraisal. This produces a broad spectrum of possible forms of assessment, particularly with regard to learning outcomes acquired via non-formal and informal means. The figure provides a summary of various methods of self-assessment and external assessment.

Certification

Assessment is followed by certification – “an external assessment recorded in writing which is usually based on an external examination, is output-oriented and is aligned towards professional competences” (GNAHS 2010, p. 48) – which takes place on the basis of certain (minimum) standards and reference levels. Certain entitlements are linked with certification in some cases. Certification means that a competent and legitimised body confirms that an individual is in possession of the relevant skills, abilities and competences and that these have been assessed in accordance with stipulated standards (cf. Cedefop 2008, p. 41). Certification always takes place on the basis of the results of the preceding stages.

Interim conclusion

More detailed consideration of the individual stages of a validation process as stated in the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union makes it clear that these stages build upon one another and that the results of the previous stage are of significance for the following stages. It is also revealed that the individual steps cannot always be delineated in a fully clear-cut way. With regard to the stages of identification and documentation, it should be remarked that these require a certain alignment insofar as the intention is to continue with assessment and certification as further stages within the validation procedure.

Guidance should be mentioned as a further relevant element in the validation process. This extends to provide integrative support for the elements named. Guidance, or information provided at the outset of a validation process, also appears to be necessary to make the overall procedure transparent and provide guidance as to expense and possible benefits.

Examples of developments in German-speaking countries

The four stages of a validation process stated in the Council Recommendation are reflected in the German debate on procedures for the recognition of competences acquired via non-formal and informal means. Mention should be made at this point that in Germany the term recognition procedures often tends to be used rather than validation procedures and that a differentiation is sometimes drawn between the two. Whereas the term “recognition” is more strongly associated with the formal legal aspect, the term “validation” frequently primarily refers to aspects of a more methodological nature.

GUTSCHOW (2010, p. 13) makes a textbook distinction between the following phases in assessment procedures:

1. Information, guidance
2. Evidence of competences acquired (within the meaning of documentation)
3. Presentation of the competences to an evaluating committee
4. Confirmation of the competences identified
5. Certification by the competent body.

DEHNBOSTEL/SEIDEL/STAMM-RIEMER (2010) undertake a similar division of the phases:

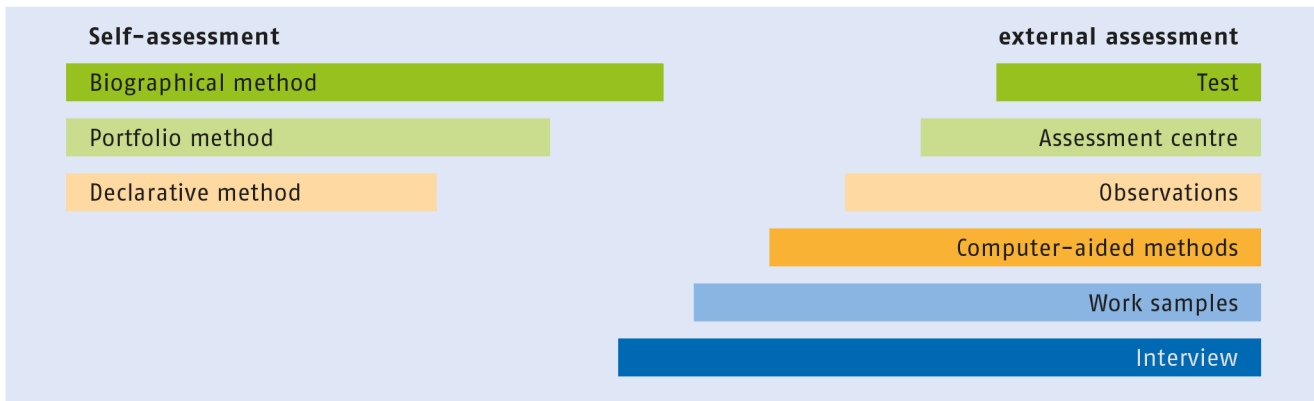
1. Information and guidance
2. Investigation
3. Assessment
4. Validation
5. Certification.

They also point out that the main purpose of such a differentiation is analytical and that such a clear-cut division seldom occurs in practice (cf. *ibid.* pp. 15 ff.). Various approaches and procedures are used in practice that do not necessarily encompass all the stages named above. Once again, a differentiation needs to be drawn between procedures which are of a more summative and application-oriented nature, such as the external examination in Germany, which aims at formal certification, and procedures which tend towards being formative and development-oriented. An example of the latter is the ProfilPASS System, which aims at individual competence development.

The possibility of obtaining validation of non-formal and informal learning has existed in Switzerland since 2005 (cf. Art. 9 (2) BBG – Swiss Vocational Training Act). The so-called validation of learning achievements is deemed to be a “different” but equivalent qualifications procedure for the certification of competences with regard to the acquisition of a recognised vocational qualification (alongside further “different” qualifications procedures). Admittance to these different qualifications procedures, which must re-

Figure

Methods of self-assessment and external assessment



Source: ANNEN 2012, p. 224

ceive Federal Government recognition pursuant to Article 33 BBG, is not dependent upon attendance of certain educational courses (Art. 34 (2) BBG). Overall Swiss guidelines for the procedure to validate educational achievements differentiates between the following five phases (cf. BBT 2010, pp. 10 ff.):

1. Information and guidance
2. Consideration
3. Assessment
4. Validation
5. Certification

This shows that the Swiss validation process deviates only slightly from the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union. The process ultimately includes the essential phases called for in the Recommendation. The “consideration” phase contains the identification and documentation of individual skills, abilities and competences. As in the Council Recommendation, the term “validation” is used as an overarching term to designate the whole of the procedure whilst at the same time also representing a phase between assessment and certification. Within the scope of this process, a so-called validation organ decides which employability skills have been achieved and which requirements criteria from general education have been fulfilled and then issues a confirmation of learning achievement. This committee also stipulates which supplementary education and training a candidate still must complete in order to receive the qualification aimed at (cf. BBT 2010, p. 13). Intensive debate surrounding the implementation of procedures for the validation of competences is also taking place in Austria. There is, however, a delineation from so-called recognition procedures. Validation procedures directly address the learning outcomes of individual persons and are less concerned with the comparison of qualifications on the basis of curricula, something which is an essen-

tial characteristic of recognition processes. To this extent, a differentiation is made in the Austrian debate between the recognition of qualifications and procedures for the validation of competences. The latter are also further differentiated into formal, summative and formative processes. Within the framework of *formative procedures*, a description and assessment of individual competences is made. Standardised certification does not, however, take place. By way of contrast, *summative* validation procedures involve certification outside the formal educational system. The ultimate aim of a formal validation is to arrive at equivalence with qualifications within the formal educational system (cf. BIFFL/PFEFFER/SKRIVANEK 2012, pp. 29 ff.).

It is thus revealed that the Austrian understanding of the stages of identification, documentation and assessment as described in the Council Recommendation are also reflected in the formative validation procedures. The certification stage is, on the other hand, added in the case of summative and formal validation procedures outside or inside the formal educational system.

Functioning validation practice despite a lack of terminological clarity

A deeper analysis of the terminology used shows the problem of the definition of the concept of “validation” itself, which is used both as an overarching term for the whole of the process and as a term for an autonomous stage within this process. Within the overall process, the stage of validation is always localised between the stages of assessment and certification (for the problem of the definition of the term “validation” cf. ANNEN 2012, pp. 135 ff.). These overlapping terms do not, however, seem to create any problems in practice due to the fact that the delineation of the individual stages tends anyway to be more analytical in nature.

The Council Recommendation has sent out an important policy impetus at European level in terms of driving forward the development and implementation of validation procedures in the individual member states. The present article is an attempt to flesh out the terminology of the policy stages demanded and to illustrate their significance within the scope of a validation procedure. The sample consideration of the national debates fundamentally demonstrates awareness with regard to validation or recognition procedures. It is also clear that the stages differentiated in the Council Recommendation are viewed as a textbook characterisation of validation procedures and are being adapted and contextualised at a national level. ◀

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