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Challenges associated with the introduction of procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Germany

Results of a Delphi scenario

The call for greater account to be taken in the educational system and on the labour market of non-formal and informal learning now enjoys a broad degree of consent in Germany. A BIBB research project has developed scenarios which depict relevant procedures which could be established in Germany over the course of the coming years. A Delphi survey was conducted in which experts in some cases gave a critical assessment of the opportunities for the implementation of these scenarios. However, despite all the obstacles, preferred procedures were identified. In combination these fulfil the expectations of respondents with regard to the identification, documentation, evaluation and certification of non-formal and informal learning.

▶ Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Non-formal and informal learning, i.e. learning that takes place outside formal training and educational processes, is viewed as an important component of lifelong learning in educational policy terms.

Formal and non-formal learning processes are organised. Formal learning is predominantly arranged externally. Non-formal learning occurs in a planned and structured way, but is not necessarily designed as a learning process. It may, for example, take place in a work-integrated form. By way of contrast, in-

formal learning processes may occur incidentally. In such cases, they are not the intention or the goal of the action. Informal learning may further be viewed as encompassing all learning activities outside institutionally organised forms of learning which are consciously undertaken with the goal of learning something. This type of learning does not usually lead to a certificate. Non-formal learning processes, on the other hand, may result in certification. However, compared to certificates issued in respect of formal learning processes, such certification generally possesses a less extensive currency and reputation.

These definitions should be viewed as ideal case descriptions which come up against the reality of fluent transitions and combinations. Within the formal educational system, for example, informal learning takes place in a multitude of ways. These may involve social learning as part of a group or, as is the case in the dual system of vocational education and training in Germany, learning within the work process. The alignment of learning activities to one of the three categories further depends on the structure of the educational system. In Germany, large parts of continuing general and vocational training are ascribed to non-formal learning despite the fact that learning processes in continuing training are organised, structured and intentional (see GUTSCHOW et al. 2010, pp. 9 ff.).

In 2012, the member states of the European Union issued a Recommendation¹ with the aim of introducing national systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018 “with a view to offering individuals the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned outside

formal education and training ... and to make use of that learning for their careers and further learning.”

The German Qualifications Framework (DQR) also states: “a further aim is to promote the validation of non-formal or informal learning” (German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning 2016, p. 5). Although initial recommendations for the integration of non-formal learning provision that meets certain criteria were drawn up within this context, their implementation is still due (see NUSSL 2014, pp. 50 ff.).

In a survey conducted by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) in conjunction with the Bertelsmann Foundation as part of the “BIBB Vocational Education and Training Expert Monitor” (see VELTEN/HERDIN 2016), 70 per cent of more than 300 VET specialists said that they wished to see stronger consideration accorded to individual learning outcomes acquired outside schools, training or institutes of higher education via the mechanism of a nationally standardised recognition system. Current opportunities for taking account of competences obtained have formed an object of investigation at BIBB on many occasions in recent years. Examples include looking at how non-formal and informal learning can be considered for the purpose of admission to the external examination (see SCHREIBER et al. 2012) and how companies recognise these competences (see BÖSE/DIETZEN 2017). In addition, BIBB is investigating the possibilities of technology-based competence assessment within the scope of the ASCOT research initiative (see TSCHÖPE/DIETZEN/MONNIER 2016).

Validation means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

1. IDENTIFICATION through dialogue of an individual's particular experiences;
2. DOCUMENTATION to make visible the individual's experiences;
3. a formal ASSESSMENT of these experiences; and
4. CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

Source: Council of the European Union – COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01)

► Scenarios for the introduction of validation procedures

The aims of the research project “Introduction of procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning – requirements and possible options” are to identify quality criteria and structural requirements for validation procedures and instruments in Germany and to model general conditions for the implementation of such procedures. The object of investigation is to obtain an assessment from the relevant stakeholders as to the chances of realisation, expected benefits and risks in respect of various scenarios for the introduction of various forms of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Germany. To that end, a multi-stage procedure has been deployed (see GUTSCHOW/JÖRGENS 2016, pp. 24 ff.) to model six scenarios which describe how consideration could be given to competences acquired outside formal education in Germany in 2030.

1 Council of the European Union – COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01)

Three scenarios describe validation procedures which include legally recognised certification with regard to qualifications, and three further scenarios deal with the identification and documentation of competences. The latter could be realised in such a way that it complements the former, but could also occur without the implementation of a validation procedure which leads to legal recognition in Germany.

► Validation procedures which lead to certificates from the formal educational system

The scenarios “validation procedure with partial qualifications” and “validation procedure with the goal of a vocational qualification” describe procedures which lead to certificates relating to vocational education and training qualifications. While partial qualifications are also certified in the first procedure, the second only permits full vocational education and training qualifications to be achieved. Guidance provision was also differently modelled in these two scenarios. In the “**validation procedure with partial qualifications**”, a low-threshold process with a high degree of support provision was outlined. The “**validation procedure with the goal of a vocational qualification**” requires greater involvement from participants. One of the reasons for this is that electronic processing means that there is a lower level of personal assistance. In this procedure, documented learning outcomes are evaluated in a two-stage process by local occupational experts and by central validation committees appointed by the competent bodies, each of which is responsible for certain occupations or occupational groups. In the “**validation procedure with partial qualifi-**

Summary of the scenarios modelled

Validation procedures

- Validation procedure with partial qualifications
- Validation procedure with the goal of a vocational qualification
- Validation procedure supported by a qualifications framework

Procedures for the identification and documentation of competences

- Competence assessments
- E-portfolios
- Multifunctional skills profiles

ations”, complete responsibility for evaluation and certification of learning outcomes demonstrated is assumed by the local competent bodies.

In the scenario “**validation procedure supported by a qualifications framework**”, no specific procedure is presented. Instead, modelling takes place as to how a statutorily established qualifications framework could act as a vehicle for driving forward the introduction of validation procedures. A qualification is only aligned to the national qualifications framework if stipulation has been made as to the extent to which and how experiences can be taken into account when the qualification is acquired. The qualifications framework encompasses fundamental cross-cutting requirements for the validation procedures, which are implemented in educational areas via sector-specific laws and ordinances, e.g. the Vocational Training Act or the higher education laws of the federal states. The national qualifications framework is substantiated via domain-specific qualifications frameworks, e.g. at branch level. Competence assessments which relate to domain-specific qualifications frameworks can be used as evidence in validation procedures.

► Procedures for the identification and documentation of competences

In the scenario “**competence assessment**”, everyone in Germany over the age of eighteen will, by 2030, be given the right to have their competences identified and documented with a view to supporting self-evaluation and reorientations. In dialogue with appropriately qualified advisers, participants will develop comprehensive documentation using both biographically-focussed methods and test-based methods such as personality tests. Competence assessments will conclude with a confirmation following a uniform format equivalent to a detailed curriculum vitae. The competence assessments will be conducted at accredited assessment centres.

The two other scenarios present procedures via which users will be able to act in a largely autonomous way, i.e. without comprehensive guidance, to make their learning outcomes visible.

The “**e-portfolio**” scenario describes an interactive online tool, funded by the EU, for the presentation of informal, non-formal and formal learning outcomes. The e-portfolio is created by users themselves and contains a

broad range of content. Competencies from all areas of life, acquired at educational institutions, through occupational activity and beyond, may be presented. Users can also, for instance, upload certificates of formal qualifications, continuing education and training certificates, digital badges and videos. In addition to the options for users to present their own evidence, opportunities for assessment by a third party are also available.

The scenario of the “**multifunctional skills profiles**” describes an electronic system for the classification of activities and skills which all citizens can use to create and manage their own skills profile. The aim of the platform is to create pan-European transparency in respect of the correlations between skills, occupations and qualifications. Access can take place through the respective national labour administration body as well as directly via an electronic portal. The index of activities contains skills descriptions which are categorised in accordance with the competence levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQR) and are linked with national qualifications. When they are drawing up their activity profiles, users themselves select the skills they have. The classification and placement system is kept up to date via additional input from national labour administration bodies, and its particular aim is to facilitate job-matching.

► Evaluation of the scenarios via a Delphi survey

A two-stage Delphi survey was conducted of people who had been identified as being concerned with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. In their capacity as ex-

perts, these respondents were asked to evaluate the scenarios. No assumption is made that survey participants are representative of the stakeholder groups to which they are affiliated. The supposition is merely that their hierarchical position or status as “innovators” or “early adopters” means that, in line with diffusion theory, they are able to exert an influence on the opinion-forming process within their environments.

A **Delphi survey** comprises a structured group interview extending over several rounds for the assessment of future events, trends or technical developments. An exchange of information takes place after every round in order to allow experts to reconsider their opinion once they have taken into account the views expressed by other specialists. The Delphi method is used primarily in future research in areas such as assessment of technology or policy advice.

Delphi surveys can pursue various goals (see HÄDER 2002, pp. 29 ff.). They can be used to collect different ideas, to obtain as exact a forecast as possible in regard to uncertain facts and circumstances, to identify views regarding wide ranges of issues or to build a consensus. The particular objective of this survey was to qualify expert opinions in order to be able to derive conclusions for possible interventions. The presentation of the results below pays particular regard to factors which constitute an obstacle to the realisation of the scenarios.

The focus of the first round of the survey was on core characteristics of the scenarios, on the desirability and feasibility of these features and on their possible implications for the educational system. Written contact was made with 327 experts from various areas of the educational and em-

ployment system, from the academic research community and from voluntary sector institutions which offer or document learning activities (see Table 1). The response rate was 53 per cent.

Genders were equally represented in the first round of potential respondents contacted (50.5 % male, 49.5% female), in the number of responses received from the first round (50% male and 50% female) and in the parties contacted for the second round of the survey (also 50% male and 50% female). However, the proportion of females responding to the second survey round was only 44 per cent.

Of those taking part in the survey, slightly more than half rated their familiarity with the topic as being reflected by one of the top two positive values on a five-level scale. A further 26 per cent felt that they were moderately acquainted with the issue at hand. Respondents from the field of research were most likely to state the highest degree of familiarity. Survey respondents involved with policy-making were less likely to have previously considered this thematic area in detail.

In the second round of the survey, written contact was made once again with the 172 people who had taken part in the first wave. 109 responses were received (a response rate of 63%). The focus in this round of the survey was on aspects which could hinder the realisation of the scenarios and on fundamental issues relating to validation. The questionnaire used was generated on the basis of an assessment of the first survey round, the results of which were made available to all participants in the form of an evaluation report.

Table 1: Parties contacted and response rate by respondent groups

| | 1 st survey round | | | 2 nd survey round | | |
|--|------------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| | Contacted | Response | | Contacted | Response | |
| | Absolute terms | Absolute terms | % | Absolute terms | Absolute terms | % |
| Continuing training institution (general, vocational) | 46 | 31 | 67 | 31 | 18 | 58 |
| Research | 67 | 41 | 61 | 41 | 33 | 80 |
| Government administration | 43 | 25 | 58 | 25 | 14 | 56 |
| Educational and migration guidance | 15 | 8 | 53 | 8 | 5 | 63 |
| Chamber, competent body pursuant to Vocational Education and Training Act or Crafts Code | 19 | 10 | 53 | 10 | 5 | 50 |
| Employee organisation/trade union | 12 | 6 | 50 | 6 | 4 | 67 |
| Charitable/not-for-profit organisation | 28 | 14 | 50 | 14 | 9 | 64 |
| Employer organisation/trade and industry association | 16 | 6 | 38 | 6 | 3 | 50 |
| Politics | 47 | 11 | 23 | 11 | 5 | 45 |
| Others | 34 | 20 | 59 | 20 | 13 | 65 |
| Total | 327 | 172 | 53 | 172 | 109 | 63 |

► Chances of realisation were predominantly rated lower than desirability

An initial glance at the desirability and chances of realisation of the scenarios outlined (see Figure 1) makes it clear that the introduction of procedures in Germany for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning could meet with obstacles. With one

exception, the wish expressed by respondents that the scenarios should become reality is significantly greater than an evaluation of the chances of realisation.

The comparatively low evaluation of the chances of realisation does not seem to be driven, at least fundamentally, by fears regarding lack of com-

patibility with the current educational system (see Figure 2).

In each case, at least half of respondents feel that the scenarios could be effectively integrated into the present educational system. Nor did the majority expect that a negative influence would be exerted on the esteem in which the existing educational system is held. Depending on the scenar-

Figure 1: Evaluation of respondents regarding chances of realisation and desirability of the validation procedures (1st round of the Delphi survey, n = 172, figures in per cent)

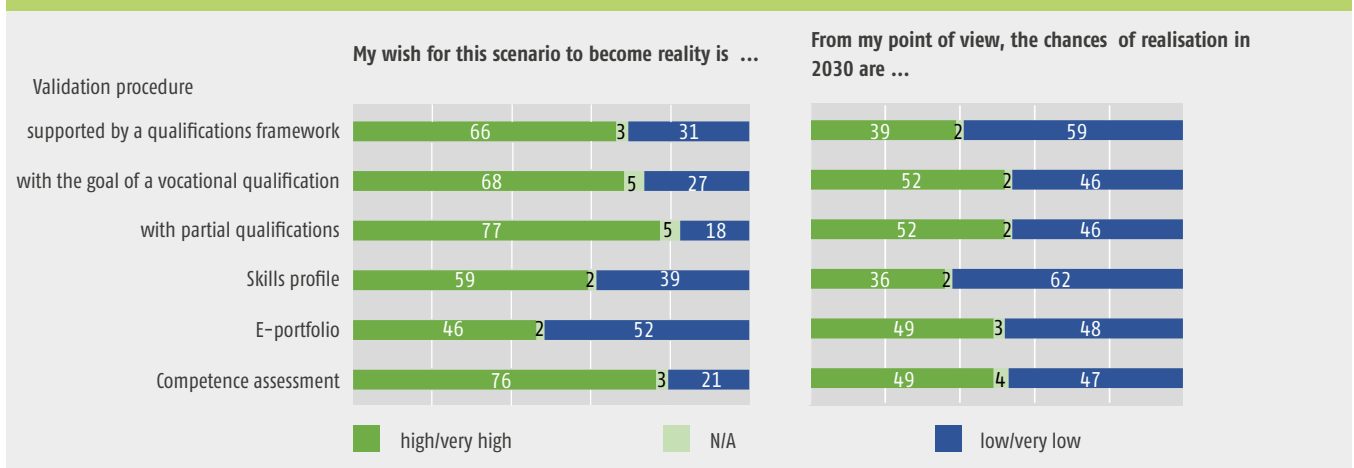
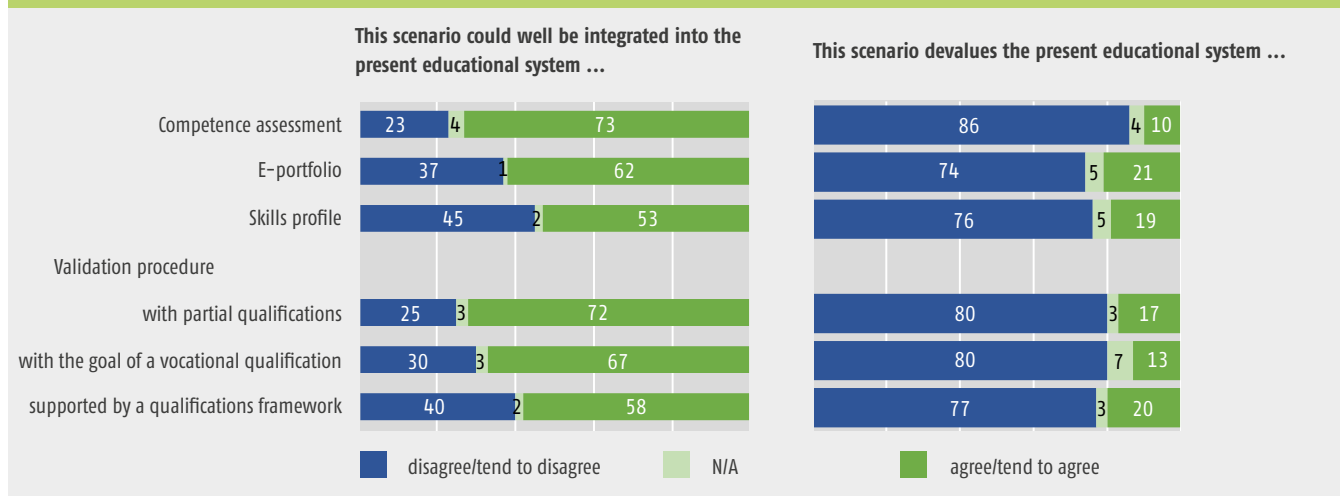


Figure 2: Evaluation of the scenarios with regard to integrability into or devaluation of the existing educational system (1st round of the Delphi survey, n = 172, figures in per cent)



io, only between 10 and 21 per cent of respondents agree with the statement that the scenarios will devalue the current educational system.

What then are the aspects which constitute an obstacle to a realisation of the scenarios? The hurdles which the experts evaluated as being the most relevant are presented per scenario below.

► Resistance to partial qualifications from educational policy stakeholders

Of the three validation procedures outlined, the validation procedure with partial qualifications enjoys the greatest degree of approval and attracts a desirability rating of 77 per cent. However, 46 per cent of respondents believe that the chances of realisation for such a scenario are low or very low (see Figure 1).

Respondents express particularly major apprehensions that the introduction of partial qualifications will not be supported by relevant educational policy stakeholders (82% agreement). Resistance is especially

assumed on the part of the competent bodies and the employee and employer associations (see Figure 3). These presumptions are confirmed by an analysis of the question regarding the desirability of the scenario. Whereas only 18 per cent of total respondents describe the desirability of this scenario as low or very low, the corresponding figures for representatives of the competent bodies and of the employer and employee organisations are 40 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively.

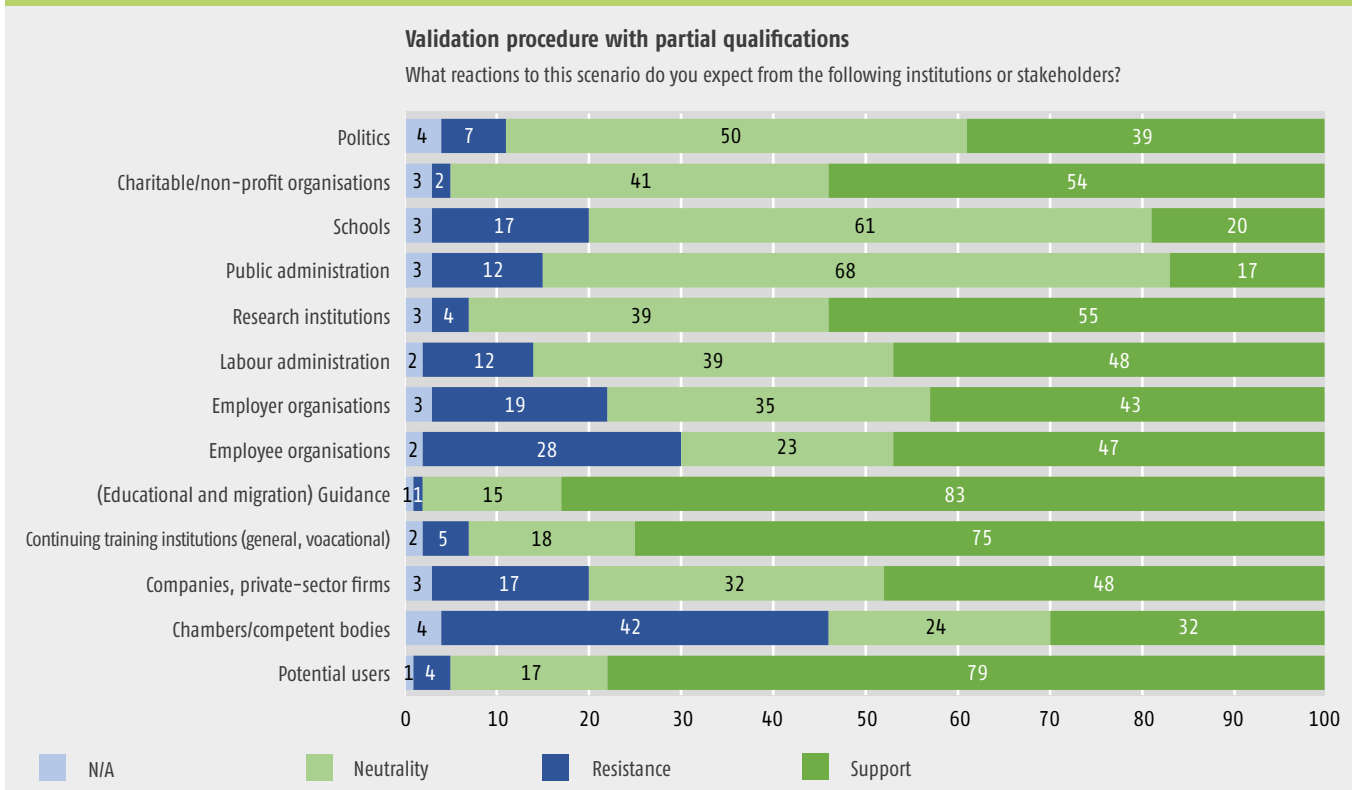
Respondents view the capacities of the examination boards as a further potential obstacle to realisation of the scenario. Sixty-two per cent are concerned that demands placed on examination boards in terms of time required for the assessment of documented parts of qualifications will be too great. There is also a fear (expressed by 61% of respondents) that coordination of the procedure would be too costly and time-consuming.

► Overburdening of participants is a possible obstacle

As many as 62 per cent of respondents rated the chances of realisation of the outlined “validation procedure with the goal of a vocational qualification”, which aims to lead directly to a vocational qualification and places high demands in terms of participants’ commitment as low or very low (see Figure 1). Unlike in the case of the validation procedure with partial qualifications, however, there is no primary reservation that the procedure will not be supported by relevant educational policy stakeholders. Experts view the high requirements made of participants with regard to autonomous identification and documentation of competences as particular obstacles (73% agreement). Within this context, 95 per cent of respondents agree or tend to agree that the absence of an advisory structure will make it more difficult for participants to successfully complete the procedure outlined.

Fears are also expressed with regard to the time capacities of the experts appointed by the competent bodies, whose planned role is to carry out an

Figure 3: Evaluations of respondents with regard to reactions from institutions and stakeholders to the graduated validation procedure (2nd round of the Delphi survey, n = 109, figures in per cent)



evaluation of the comprehensive action skills (67% agreement). Similar evaluations are expressed in respect of the time demands placed on the validation committees appointed by the lead chambers for the purpose of reconciling the evaluations conducted by the experts. 64 per cent of respondents believe that the time demands involved will be too great.

► **Firm establishment of validation in the qualifications framework – difficulty of structuring general legal conditions in a complex environment**

Respondents accord the validation procedure based on a qualifications framework the lowest rating, both with regard to chances of realisation and desirability (see Figure 1). Integrability into the current educational

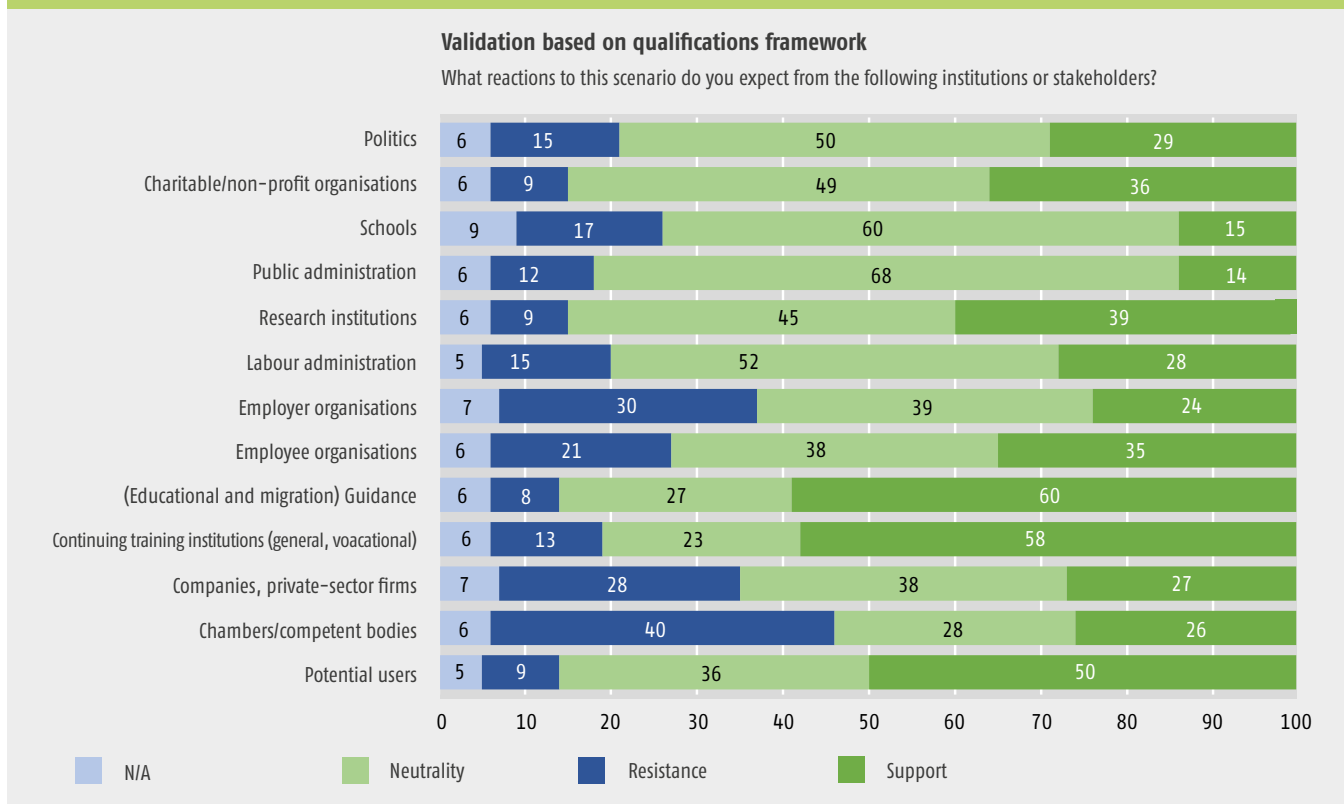
system (see Figure 2) also receives a comparatively low evaluation.

Apprehensions in connection with this scenario predominantly relate to implementation of the relevant legal framework. 85 per cent of respondents believe that it will be difficult to realise a cross-cutting legal framework (covering vocational education and training, general education and higher education). In addition, 73 per cent of the experts assume that educational policy stakeholders will largely reject the idea of making the inclusion of a qualification in the qualifications framework dependent on statements regarding recognition of existing competences.

As in the case of the validation procedure with partial qualifications, respondents expect that resistance to this scenario will come from representatives of the competent bodies and employer organisations in par-

ticular. The survey is unable to confirm this assumption. Evaluations regarding desirability of the scenario made by representatives of the competent bodies are in line with the average (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, a comparatively critical attitude can be confirmed on the part of respondents representing the employer and employee organisations (although the numbers taking part in the survey are low). A majority of these respondents believe that realisation of this scenario is not desirable. This means that the resistance of these stakeholder groups may be underestimated by the respondents (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Evaluations of respondents with regard to reactions from institutions and stakeholders to the validation procedure based on a qualifications framework (2nd round of the Delphi survey, n = 109, figures in per cent)



► Are the costs of a comprehensive competence assessment too high?

Of the procedures for the identification and documentation of competences, the competence assessment scenario receives the highest level of approval from the respondents by some distance (76% desirability rating, see Figure 1). At the same time, this is the scenario in which the difference between evaluation of chances of realisation (49% rate these as high or very high, see Figure 1) and desirability is the greatest.

The major fear expressed in regard to this scenario is that the costs of the procedure are too high (78% agreement). 69 per cent also feel that it is appropriate for all costs of the competence assessment to be paid from the public purse for all interested parties.

66 per cent of respondents believe that the time-consuming and costly establishment of a qualified guidance structure represents a further obstacle to the realisation of this scenario. Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus that such a structure will be required. 92 per cent of the experts believe that individual support from assessment centres will be necessary.

► E-portfolio – not desired, but not improbable

The e-portfolio outlined, which is created by the users themselves, is the only one of the six scenarios in which chances of realisation are rated as being higher than desirability (49% evaluate the chances of realisation as high or very high, and 46% assess desirability as great or very great (see Figure 1). The influences of gender and age are interesting in this regard. Desirability is less marked

amongst female experts (35%) than amongst male respondents (52%). Chances of realisation are rated less highly as age rises. 65 per cent of respondents aged up to 50 believe the chances of realisation are high or very high, but the same view is held by only 37 per cent of those aged 60 and over.

Respondents are of the opinion that the high requirements made of participants with regard to autonomous identification, documentation and presentation of competences constitute the most significant obstacle to realisation of the scenario (77% agreement). Furthermore, demands made on the media competence of users are too high (69% agreement). 93 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that a personal advisory service should be provided to support this instrument. Otherwise, according to 87 per cent of the experts, the particular beneficiaries

of the scenario would be well-trained people with a high degree of technical affinity.

The respondents also express reservations regarding data protection and do not believe the e-portfolio as outlined provides sufficient safeguards in this respect (74% agreement). There is virtually unanimous agreement (99%) that portfolio owners must have full control over who is able to view their data and to which extent.

► A European database for task profiles – scarcely capable of realisation

The scenario of the multifunctional task profiles, which describes an electronic system for the classification of activities and skills, is ascribed the lowest chances of realisation of all the scenarios (62% rate the chances of realisation as low or very low). The desirability of this scenario also receives a comparatively low evaluation score of 59 per cent.

Reservations are particularly expressed in respect of implementation and management of the large quantities of data involved. 82 per cent of respondents believe that maintaining the current validity and completeness of a European-wide database is scarcely feasible. 79 per cent of the experts also take the view that it will be virtually impossible to realise an interlinking of tasks, skills and competence levels across countries.²

As is already the case in respect of the validation procedure with the goal of a vocational qualification and the

e-portfolio, there are reservations as to autonomous use of the instrument. In this instance, 75 per cent of respondents fear that its complexity will make things more difficult. 92 per cent of the experts perceive the need for personal guidance provision.

► Looking ahead – favoured procedures

Agreement in principle with validation procedures is very high (see Figure 1). The experts also fundamentally rate the integrability of the procedures outlined into the current educational systems as good. However, detailed consideration reveals that different requirements and expectations are associated with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

There is general agreement with the statements that validation procedures increase the employability skills of participants and that they may make a significant contribution to occupational and personal development (see Figure 5).

The spectrum of competences which may be taken into account in a validation procedure ranges from alignment to the individual to orientation to reference points such as qualification standards. There is consent for both perspectives. 88 per cent of the experts agree with the demand that validation procedures should encompass as comprehensive a picture as possible of individual competences. 64 per cent are in favour of close alignment to the requirements of recognised qualifications (see Figure 5).

Usefulness on the labour market is the most important aspect of competence recognition for the majority of respondents. The experts are in dispute as to whether the results of validation

procedures should be certified with a formal qualification. Slightly more than half are in favour, but 46 per cent are opposed. However, the issuing of certificates of equivalence confirming full or partial equivalence with a qualification profile is widely welcomed by 86 per cent of respondents (see Figure 6). This option was not modelled in the scenarios, but is currently being piloted in the VALIKOM project³ commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

It seems questionable whether all expectations can be met by a single procedure. The two favoured scenarios are competence assessment and the validation procedure with partial qualifications, which creates a reference to qualification standards. However, these options map differing positions with regard to the scope of learning outcomes to be recorded. Both scenarios also receive the most positive evaluation in respect of integrability into the present educational system (see Figure 2). In addition, these two procedures are most frequently stated in response to the question as to the most useful combination of scenarios. The establishment of a system for comprehensive competence assessment and of a validation procedure which certifies full or partial equivalence with formal qualifications would enable a full picture of individual competences to be identified and would also allow competences acquired to be certified in reference to recognised qualifications.

2 Integration of this nature is intended with ESCO (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations), the multilingual classification of skills, competences, qualifications and occupations which is currently being developed by the European Commission in conjunction with CEDEFOP and further stakeholders. <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/home>.

3 For more information on this project, please visit: <https://www.valikom.de/startseite/>

Figure 5: Evaluation of main aspects of validation procedures by respondents
(2nd round of the Delphi survey, n = 109, figures in per cent)

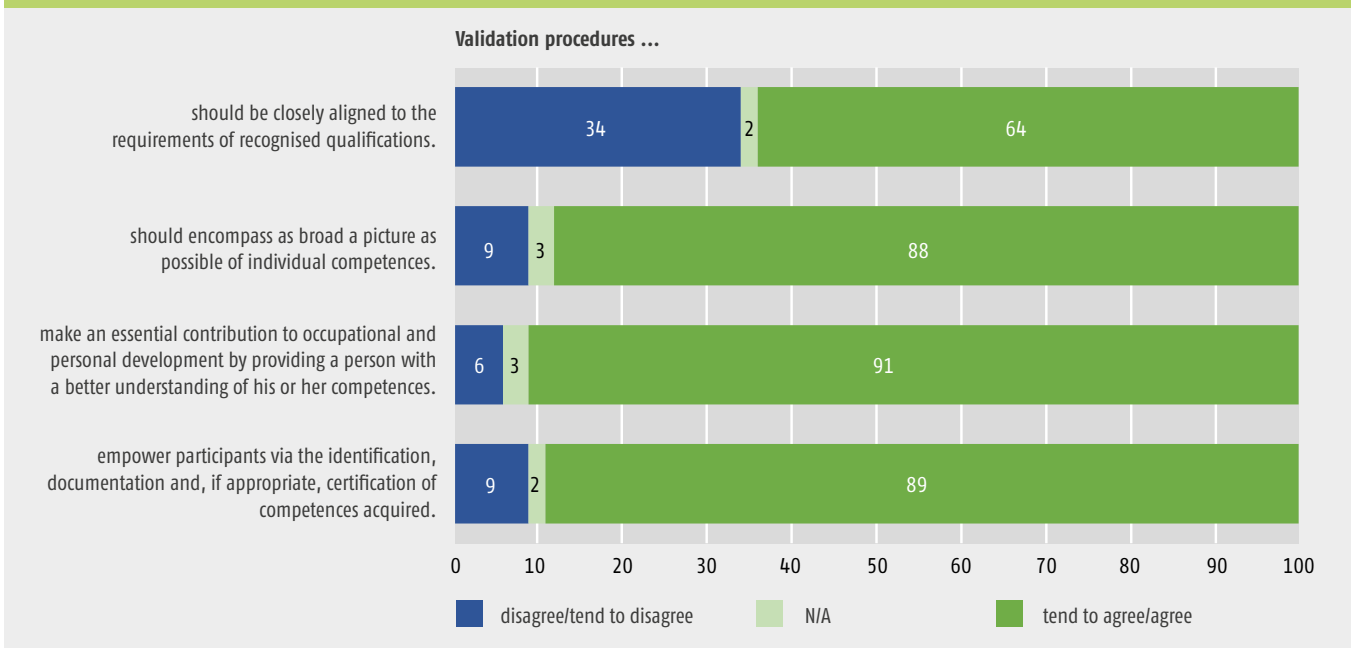
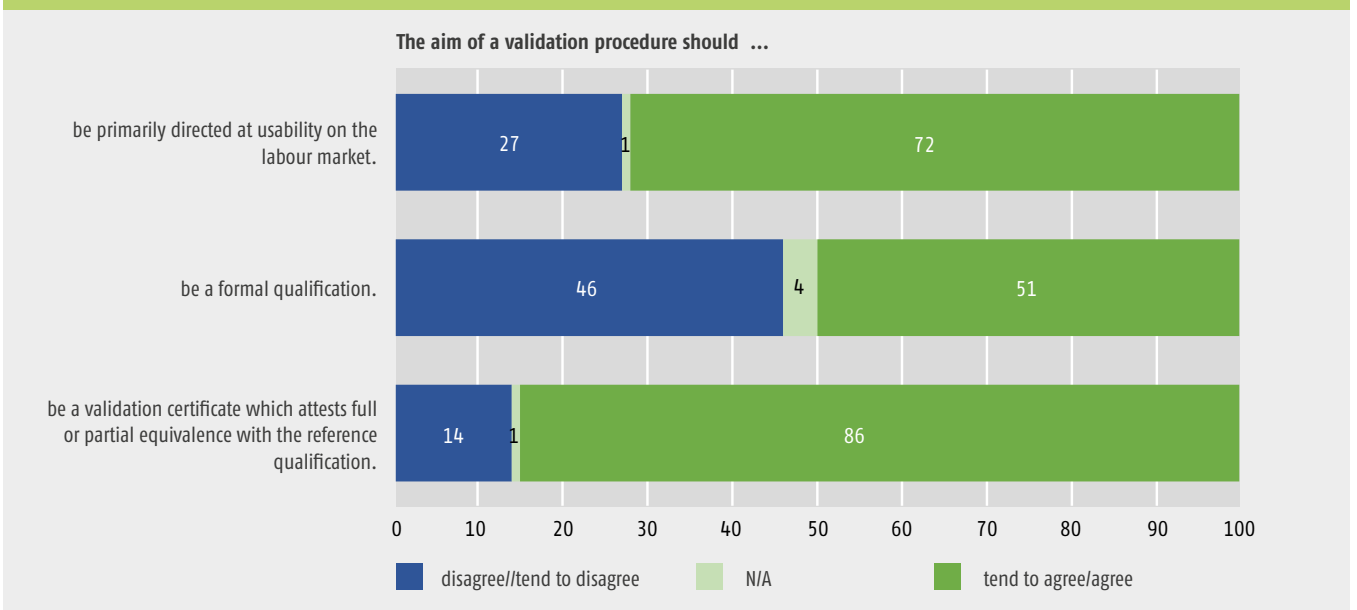


Figure 6: Evaluation of the objective of a validation procedure by respondents
(2nd round of the Delphi survey, n = 109, figures in per cent)



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