

# Making learning visible: A European perspective to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

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When I go to the doctor or my lawyer, I always look at their diplomas, proudly hanging on the wall. They are an attestation that they have gone through certain years of education and (most likely) suffered a great deal of sleepless nights to obtain their degrees. Their diplomas have the function of reassuring me that I am meeting professionals who has certain skills and competences to carry out their job. Those diplomas constitute *proof* that certain knowledge and skills have been acquired.

A great deal of their knowledge and skills, however, has been acquired outside formal education institutions, through further training or on-the-job. This is what we call **non-formal and informal learning**. People develop knowledge and skills in many different settings: at home, at work, at the community centre; and in different ways: attending courses at work, through reading on their own, surfing the internet, by experimenting, by talking to people, through observation. There is little doubt that non-formal and informal learning plays a significant role in the development of individual's skills. According to the [Adult Education Survey](#) (AES) over one third of all adults in the EU typically participate in non-formal learning compared to around one in twenty in formal further education courses.

Despite this, the skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning tend to be *invisible*, or at least, they are much less considered when one is looking for a job or pursuing career advancement. On the contrary, diplomas or certificates from formal education institutions are *visible*, i.e. are recognisable and trusted by customers, employers and other educational institutions. In the case of non-formal and informal learning, there is normally no certification, or if there is, this might not necessarily be trusted or recognised by third parties. In other words, the skills and knowledge acquired outside formal education remain to a large degree un-valued in the labour market, not permitting individuals to use their full skill potential.

The process of making skills visible and giving value to non-formal and informal learning is what we call **validation**. Many expressions have been used to refer to this phenomenon: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), validation of prior learning (VPL), etc. All of them are slightly different, but they all have a common aim to make the outcomes of a learning process visible, providing it with a sort of currency or value that otherwise remains hidden. The European Union has defined validation as: *a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard*<sup>[1]</sup>, and it continues: *It consists of four distinct phases: Identification, documentation, assessment and certification (see box).*

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## European approach to validation

In 2012, the Heads of State of the EU countries issued a [recommendation](#) to Member States to put in place by 2018 validation arrangements that, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, enable individuals to:

- have knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, and
- obtain a full qualification or, where applicable, part of a qualification.

In addition, it provides a series of aspects that create more efficient and coherent validation arrangements. These includes among others the connection to National Qualification systems (and hence in line with The European Qualifications Framework EQF) and credit systems, the provision of information and guidance, especially for disadvantage groups, who are also asked to be given the opportunity to carry out 'skills audits'. These different aspects have been further elaborated in the [European guidelines on validation](#) while the way of implementation of these demands are collected in the [European inventory](#). A first experimental attempt to link the Guidelines to the Inventory has been made through [data visualisation](#) at Cedefop's website.

Evidence from the European inventory suggests that political commitment in creating national validation strategies is increasing, but there are a lot of cross- and within country differences. There is a need for further coordination of services that provide validation and further involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including employers. General public awareness is still limited and more needs to be done in raising interest and availability of validation possibilities.

The Recommendation has started the process, but it is important that this is accompanied with a change in attitudes, where diplomas or certificates obtained through the validation of non-formal and informal learning are seen as relevant and valuable as those obtained through formal education.

Cedefop is organising a conference on [Making Learning visible](#) in November 28-29, 2016 in Thessaloniki, Greece.

[i] [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222\(01\)&rid=3](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222(01)&rid=3)

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