

Summary of the PLA on 'Funding validation. Costs and benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning'

By Lieve Van den Brande, European Commission, DG Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion

On 14 and 15th of December 2017 the Peer Learning Activity organised by the Flemish and French Belgian Ministries of Education brought together 50 participants (EQF-AG members, policy makers on validation of non-formal and informal learning, practitioners, social partners, private sector stakeholders, youth organisations, etc.) to discuss how one can improve cost-benefit models for validation.

'2018' is the year that all EU member States are implementing their national working arrangements on validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL). Setting up functional systems for validation is complex and perceived as expensive. This perception does not respond to the reality but validation costs are rarely measured and nearly not compared with 'real' costs for formal education. What would be the cost of having no validation? The 2016 European Inventory on VNIL shows that there is still little information available on the actual costs of validation. Financing of validation of course depends on the way the validation arrangements have been organised in each country. As such it is difficult to advocate for validation initiatives. The PLA was organised around a set of questions discussed in a background paper.

The PLA demonstrated through good practice cases in which way validation is funded (Belgium: Flanders & Wallonia), the Netherlands, France, Iceland, Portugal, United Kingdom, ...) that cost-benefit models of validation do exist and costs calculation of validation are possible. The calculation of benefits is more complicated as one has to look into many intangibles and non-monetary benefits such as equity in access to learning.

However these practices also show that these cost-benefit models are exploratory in nature, not always coherent and thus less comparable. Second, funding validation models on itself are only an instrument and not enough to directly convince and change the mind-set of policy makers and practitioners to embed validation of non-formal and informal learning into their policies. Examples show the importance of commitment and engagement of the State in requesting and/or initiating studies on cost-benefit analyses as input to implementing validation processes.

The PLA participants therefore recommend to:

1. Build the case for validation: more efforts European-wide should be made on building evidence and on provide more and better data on cost-benefit models. Targeted empirical research and experiments on funding validation models in the various EU member states should be supported by EU funding and emphasis should be given to meta-analyses on return-of-investment and societal benefits. This research should propose a coherent

approach of calculation of costs and benefits of validation. One should also emphasize more the costs for the end-user and not only for the provider. A specific Eurobarometer on validation could be an interesting path to explore. Establishing specific benchmarks for cost-benefit models based on hard data is another path to investigate.

2. Build a clear story around validation taking into account its fundamental values: (i) All learning is relevant, (ii) Formal learning to be complemented by non-formal and informal learning, (iii) Lifelong learning perspective and (iv) Opening up to non-traditional learners. Costs should be presented on a continuum depending on each individual case ranging from easy, cheap procedures to complicated with bilateral counselling and thus expensive procedures.
3. Enhance community building among all multiple stakeholders involved in the validation processes through European-wide events mobilising and engaging bottom-up the real providers and users of validation as well as foreseeing a platform for dialogue and sharing practices and good cases. A single European entry point linking sites for community building; studies and research; national reports, testimonials and stories, blogs, etc. would be ideal. A group of Ambassadors to make the case both from the policy makers, validation providers as from end-users would be another way. It is also recommended to make better use of the existing NCP's.
4. Funding validation models should be an integral part of a coherent ecosystem around VNIL whereby the individual learner is central and individual LLL pathways are the norm. Validation should be linked to an integrated guidance, counselling and training (such is the case around apprenticeships) initiative. The coherent ecosystem should be both very flexible for each individual as well as broad enough to cover multiple stages, services, target groups, etc.
5. Enhance upscaling and sustainability of validation procedures through larger pilots and experimentations across multiple EU member states.
6. Emphasise how validation processes and procedures can be made more efficient and effective. Cost-benefit models should lead to efficiency gains as well as to equity of learning. A self-assessment tool to measure the degree of validation implemented in an organisation could be an interesting path to explore further.

Lieve Van den Brande

European Commission

DG Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion

Directorate E, Unit E2: Skills and Qualifications

SPA 3, 4th floor, Office 24

BE-1049 Brussels

+32-2-296.34.25 (direct phone)

e-mail: Godelieve.van-den-brande@ec.europa.eu