

The Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Learning in the Active Leisure Sector

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1. Introduction

A key aspiration of the development of the Active Leisure sector in Europe is to *“reflect on the changing roles of fitness and outdoor workers in developing skills to meet new digital technologies, promoting health-enhancing physical activity (sometimes with other healthcare professionals), and working with special population groups”*.¹

A core aspect of this is to explore what we know about how people learn, and how this is reflected in the acquisition and recognition of knowledge, skills and behaviours in the Active Leisure sector.

This document provides an initial overview of existing programmes validating informal and non-formal learning across Europe and other continents. It is perceived this document will be iterative and continue to evolve to reflect the nature of both learning and development, and the Active Leisure sector.

2. General Context

On December, 20th 2012 the Council of the European Union provided a recommendation which encouraged Member States to put in place national arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018.² The intention was that these arrangements would enable individuals to evidence their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training whether that be as part of their work activities, or in other environments.

The European Commission in their document “Unlocking Talent: Validation of non-formal and informal learning” outlined three core groups who can benefit from validation:

- Individuals – They can have their skills recognised, gain easier access to jobs and further learning, and become more aware of their own talents;
- Employers – They can better understand and identify talent, better match skills with labour market demands, and update and renew in-company skills;
- Learning providers – They can reach out to lifelong learners including specific groups such as adult learners, the unemployed and refugees, and make what they offer more flexible and inclusive.³

Other documents rehearse the arguments for the importance of this in detail. However, to provide some context, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning identify why valuing and recognising informal and non-formal learning as well as the formal opportunities is important. Acknowledging this learning *“may significantly improve individuals’ self-esteem and well-being, motivate them to further learning*

¹ <https://www.europeactive-euaffairs.eu/projects/blueprint>

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

³ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f868457f-9b0b-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

*and strengthen their labour market opportunities. The Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of information and non-formal learning (RVA) may help to integrate broader sections of the population into an open and flexible education and training system and to build inclusive societies".*⁴

In essence this recognition and validation can support both individuals and communities develop. This is something which the Active Leisure sector is keen to embrace.

The engagement with the recommendation has been variable, with some Members States evolving existing activity, some developing new mechanisms for validation, and others prioritising other areas of learning and development. Some of the processes are focused through a national approach, and others through sectoral approaches. It is important to recognise this as it suggests there will need to be a prioritisation, and phased approach to supporting those involved in the development of validation processes.

It should also be noted that there are potential links to existing programmes designed to support mobility across members states such as European Credit system for Vocational Education & Training (ECVET) and European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). These programmes can align more closely to crediting informal and non-formal learning as part of an existing academic or vocational training programme, drawing credit from purposeful activity. The RVA activity is more focused on recognising an individual's skills without enrolment on a specific educational programme or course. That is not to say, the outcome of RVA activity might lead to a formal qualification, just that the formal programme is not the driver.

In the time since the 2012 recommendation⁵ there have been two organisations who have notably provided materials to support the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and led the discussions in this area. These are:

- The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training⁶
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.⁷

Cedefop works to strengthen European cooperation and provide the evidence on which to base European Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy. An element of this work has been around informal and non-formal learning opportunities, and has included the development of insight and publications⁸ which explore how informal and non-formal learning is being implemented in different Member States.

⁴ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000216360>

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

⁶ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

⁷ <https://uil.unesco.org/>

⁸ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

This information includes a European inventory of validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁹ which was last updated in 2018 and European guidelines on validation ¹⁰ which was last reviewed in 2015.

The inventory provides an overview of validation activity across 36 countries (including all Member States), and offers detailed data on the development, implementation and review of the systems in place. This provides an extremely useful reference point to explore which Members States are embracing which components of the validation process, and in what areas.

The guidelines provide an overview of the 4-step process to validation advocated across the Members States. These steps are:

- Identification
- Documentation
- Assessment
- Certification

The guidelines also include an exploration of validation contexts and validation tools.

The Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) “is one of UNESCO’s key education-related institutes and is the only organizational unit in the UN family that holds a global mandate for lifelong learning. Taking a holistic and integrated, inter-sectoral and cross-sectoral approach to lifelong learning as the guiding paradigm for 21st century education, UIL promotes and supports lifelong learning with a focus on adult learning, continuing education, literacy and non-formal basic education. Its activities place particular emphasis on furthering educational equity for disadvantaged groups and in the countries most afflicted by poverty and conflict”.

The Lifelong Learning Policies and Strategies programmes are aligned to this mandate and encompasses the “Recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning”. ¹¹

UIL provide a number of useful case studies. These case studies are focused on three core areas:

- Civil society – Supporting the transition into a new society;
- Education – Supporting progression in ‘formal’ education;
- Training and the World of Work – Supporting transition and progression into work and careers.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3073>

¹¹ <https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/recognition-validation-accreditation>

Whilst the first two bullet points are of interest, for the purposes of this document the focus will remain on the final one (Training and the World of Work) to reflect a current priority of the Active Leisure sector.¹² It may be that exploration of Civil Society and Education aligned to the Active Leisure sector might be explored further in future projects.

UIL also provides a certain number of documents on the issue of RVA and for further knowledge on the issue, the reader may refer in particular to the “Guidelines for the recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning”¹³ issued by UIL after its 2012 Oslo conference in Norway.

These organisations, and their work, underpin the core aspects of this document.

3. Definitions

Whilst there is inevitable discussion regarding the meaning of certain concepts, the following definitions seem to be generally accepted as valid when discussing various aspects of learning and development.

*“Formal learning is always organised and structured and has learning objectives. From the learner’s standpoint, it is always intentional: i.e. the learner’s explicit objective is to gain knowledge, skills and/or competences.”*¹⁴

This is the learning which is traditionally accepted in the Member States, and includes formal training, and activity which has learning as its main or sole purpose. An example would be a qualification which has a structured learning programme following a clear curriculum. Some of these qualifications may include an opportunity to recognise learning which has taken place previously either through experience (Recognised Prior Learning), or assessment (Credit Accumulation and Transfer).

The less traditional learning environments, and the ones which are the focus of this document, are the informal and non-formal opportunities.

*“Informal learning is never organised, has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes and is never intentional from the learner’s standpoint. Often it is referred to as learning by experience or just as experience.”*¹⁵

¹² <https://www.europeactive-euaffairs.eu/projects/blueprint>

¹³ <https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/recognition-validation-accreditation/unesco-guidelines-recognition-validation-and>

¹⁴ <https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/recognitionofnon-formalandinformallearning-home.htm>

¹⁵ Ibid.

Using this definition, this is the learning which takes place from ‘just doing the job’. There is no focus, and no agreed destination in terms of learning, however there is learning taking place. UIL have evidence to suggest this is where most learning actually takes place in the publication “Global Perspectives on Recognising Non-formal and Informal Learning”¹⁶. This reinforces the need for validation, however, provides its own challenges in the speculative logging of activity with potentially no learning outcomes, which might be used to evidence against assessment criteria at a later date.

Informal learning should not be confused with simple work experience as it somehow always takes people out of their comfort zone.

Non-formal learning is the category of learning which has caused more discussion regarding its meaning. A useful definition is:

“Learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view.”¹⁷

So, there is an intention to learn during planned activities which aren’t specifically focused on learning. As a result of the intentional approach by the learner, this category fits well with the concept of the ‘Growth Mindset’. This is the approach where

“... people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work - brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment” (Dweck, 2008).

This can be perceived as the Nirvana of learning. A position where someone has the emotional space, and associated culture, to learn at all times, and develop a love of learning.

In essence, it is approaching activities with an understanding that they can be learning opportunities if positioned correctly. This is helpful from a validation perspective, as it gives a reference point about what might be learnt during the activity.

The final definitions are those of recognition and validation.

From the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning’s perspective **recognition** is that which:

“...renders visible and gives value to the hidden and unrecognised competences that individuals have obtained in various contexts, through various means in different phases of their lives.”¹⁸

¹⁶ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233655>

¹⁷ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4117_en.pdf

¹⁸ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233655>

This supports the recognition of learning which has taken place incidentally through general activity, but also the cross-context opportunities that informal and non-formal learning offers.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) reinforces the 2012 Recommendation.

“To clarify the basic features of validation, the recommendation identifies four distinct phases: identification; documentation; assessment; and certification.”¹⁹

The different sorts of learning can be seen as different paths which may lead to the same destination, assessed or otherwise. It is important to ensure any destination is not perceived as a final end point, more a station on the wider lifelong learning journey.

As these definitions seem to be fairly well established in the learning and development activities across the EU, it is proposed they will be used as the basis of the further discussion in this document, and generally within the Active Leisure sector.

4. Learning and Development Context

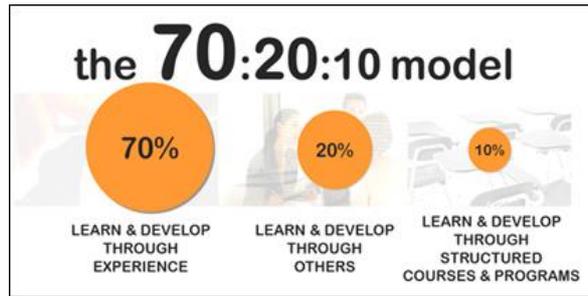
We continue to understand more about learning and development, both generically, and from an Active Leisure perspective. The catalyst for this is the leap in technological solutions which are taking place. Artificial Intelligence is allowing a more detailed understanding of markets how they operate, and how people engage (from a participation and from a learning perspective).

Whilst it is important to acknowledge there is no such thing as an ‘average’ learner there are some useful models which help us understand learning journeys, and the alignment of formal, informal and non-formal learning opportunities. It should be noted that there are many other models which can provide this function, and the models outlined below are not endorsed, but do provide examples of what are currently used in people development environments.

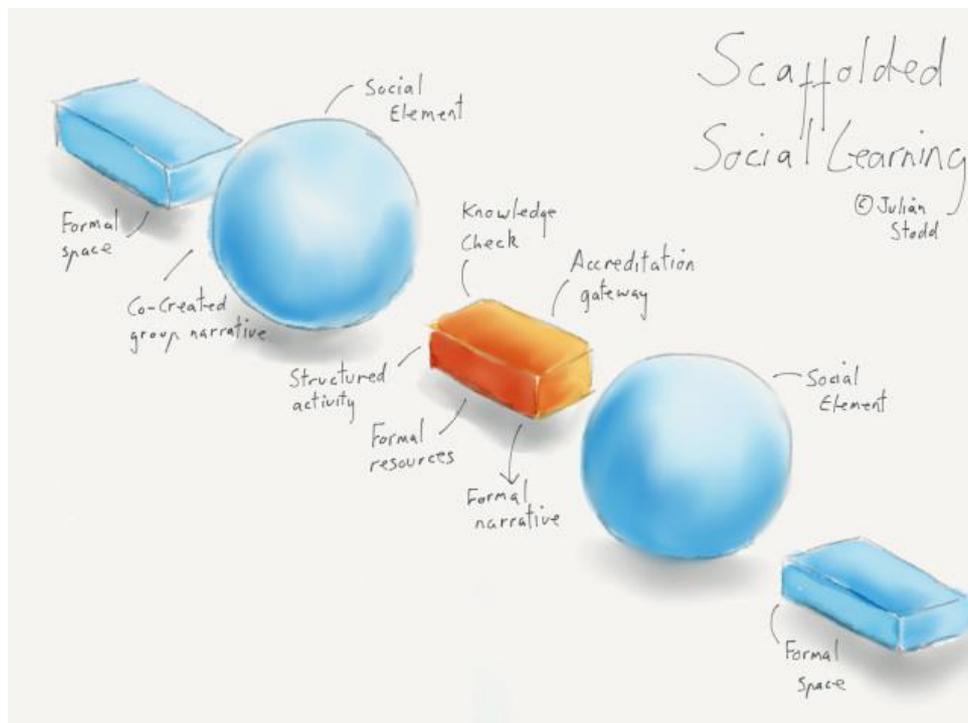
The 70-20-10 concept evolved by Charles Jennings, suggests individuals get 70% of their learning from just doing the job, 20% from engaging with others, and 10% from formal education. This is intended as a reference point to explore the opportunities offered by sectors and organisations. The model reinforces the need to embrace the validation of informal and non-formal learning. If 90% of learning could take place out of environments we are accrediting there is clearly something wrong with the system.²⁰

¹⁹ <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/008370>

²⁰ <https://702010institute.com/702010-model/>



Another model which explores the range of different learning environments, is Julian Stodd’s Scaffolded Social Learning.²¹



This model recognises that we learn in lots of different ways and in lots of different environments. These can include formal spaces where learning is intended and informal places where the learning may be as a result of social interaction with others, or even just browsing the internet. This model embraces that there may also be a need for formal assessment, by including the concept of an accreditation gateway.

Again, this model offers a good overview of the diversity of learning opportunities, and the need to acknowledge the less traditional learning environments.

The concept of the ‘Growth Mindset’ identified above (Dweck, 2008) also provides some insight into the changing context, and understanding we have of the way in which we best learn.

²¹ <https://julianstodd.wordpress.com/2014/11/05/scaffolded-social-learning/>

Whilst these are models which are open to dispute and to interpretation, they provide useful benchmarks around the potential direction of learning and development opportunities of the future.

When exploring the systems in place to validate informal and non-formal learning there should be an acknowledgement of the difference of the learning opportunities, and the assessment process. Whilst there is a link, and a need to ensure any learning opportunities are of the highest quality with the learner central to them, there should be a differentiation between a journey and a destination. The intersection of this learning and assessment is where the validation needs to take place.

In essence the learning and development context is evolving. This evolution is based on new theories, and new technologies which allow us to connect with, and understand the needs of, our learners. By embracing this evolution in the Active Leisure sector, we are able to better recognise and accredit the learning which takes place in a range of environments.

5. Purpose of Validation

There can be a range of reasons why validation systems can be put into place.

Madhu Singh (2015) suggests Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) can have a role to play in a range of areas:

- paving pathways to education, training and qualifications;
- promoting workforce development and participation in the labour market;
- social inclusion and democratic citizenship;
- personal and professional empowerment.

Amongst these roles, in-depth analysis of 'professional empowerment' may also suggest that RVA can play a further role, though slightly unexpected at first sight.

Indeed, EU Member States, professionals and sectors have a long tradition of organising themselves in trades and other professional unions in order to set up professional rules and standards. Later on, these lead to the concept of regulated professions and further on to the passing of corresponding national legislation. The motivation of all this may be of course to protect public health and safety but it may also be to regulate access to a working market, or at least to regulate the conditions ruling the way a profession shall be exercised. This also means that the EU had eventually to determine rules in order to organise mutual recognition between Member States.

In this EU context, RVA should play a central role in empowering citizens either who have not followed a 'classic' study pathway, or who have later on decided to 'pivot' from their original trade or sector into another one. This is particularly valid if the competences relating to the new activity have been acquired through informal or non-formal training, or even through professional experience.

Considering that in the EU, the role and credibility of ‘certification’ in a broad sense, still plays a major role in many Member States, both professionally and socially, RVA although not being a substitute for certification, should play a major role in giving credibility and in ‘officialising’ an EU citizen’s uncertified pathway to knowledge, skills and competences, whichever it may be. This is particularly true in conservative or old fashioned environments.

This perspective of RVA should be aligned to future explorations of any European awarding or certifying organisations in the Active Leisure sector.

Whilst it is not suggested RVA can fulfil all these roles at once, a well-designed system could support a number of them. One important aspect is to be clear of the purpose of any proposed system.

As identified below, a number of countries already have systems developed. If a collaborative approach is to be used, it is important to embrace the purpose of these systems in the context of the strategic aims of the Active Leisure sector. By understanding and acknowledging the priorities of each of the Member States, informed decisions can be made on engagements, and the incremental development of engaging with those systems specifically for the Active Leisure sector.

6. Existing Approaches to Validation across Europe

To identify a clear direction for the Active Leisure sector the exploration of the validation arrangements in a number of European countries, and the associated appetite for validation in the sector is needed.

Cedefop’s “European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning” (2018 update)²², and associated country reports, provides a very useful starting point for this exploration.

The project reports of 36 countries and regions comprising the EU-28 and the EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland) and Turkey.

On the whole, the surveyed countries and regions have chosen to either develop arrangements with a holistic, national approach, or to develop arrangements with specific sectors.

It should be noted the three main areas of implementation are education and training, labour market, the third sector. This document is mainly concerned with the labour market elements.

The level of implementation of the system is registered against three main categories:

²² <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

“Group 1. High level of implementation – There are several principles that have a good degree of comprehensiveness, meaning that the majority of countries have a medium to high level of implementation in relation to that principle, and that in many of the countries there are arrangements in place in the three broad areas: education and training, labour market and third sector. As such, most of the validation arrangements that exist will also have accessible guidance and counselling.

Similarly, information and guidance measures are also in place in sectors where validation exists in a large majority of countries. The link of validation and National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) also seems to be growing across the different areas in several countries. Finally having transparent and strong quality assurance mechanisms is another principle that is an integral part of the validation system in the majority of countries.

Transparent quality assurance mechanisms to support reliable, valid and credible assessment methods and tools for validation currently stand at medium-high degree of progress.

Group 2. Medium level of implementation – The principles of compliance with standards, synergies with credit systems (ECTS and ECVET); disadvantaged groups; transparency tools show a medium level of implementation in terms of comprehensiveness.

Group 3. Low level of implementation – There is a large majority of countries with low level of implementation in relation to two principles. First, the training of practitioners involved in the provision of information and guidance or assessment for validation is seldom provided with the associated forms of entitlement to support their work (i.e. paid leave for training, covering the costs of the training, etc.). Second, although skills audits are available for individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment in more than one third of the countries, the possibility to undergo a skills audit is not immediate or the timeframe within which it is offered is not specified”.²³

There are validation arrangements in place at a high level of implementation in 12 countries or regions, a medium level in 18, and at a low level in 6.

Of the 36, 35 countries or regions have validation arrangements in place in the education and training sector, 19 in the labour market and 23 in the third sector.²⁴

Due to the diversity of approaches, which are further explored later in this document, and differing purposes of RVAs, taken across countries it is difficult to see a single additional system for Active Leisure being adopted, supported and implemented. It is therefore suggested that a collaborative approach is taken.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For further detail on each country or region / area, please refer to Annex 3 of the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (2018 update): <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

When choosing partners to engage with, it is suggested that the initial engagements should take place with countries with established systems, and ones which align to the aims of developing new skills for current and future workers, for improving employability of young people, and supporting entrepreneurship and growth across the sector.

To this end the following countries or regions should be explored further: Belgium-Flanders, Belgium Wallonia, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland), United Kingdom (Scotland), United Kingdom (Wales), Montenegro, Turkey.

To help further refine this exploration there are sector specific examples of validation activity in the Active Leisure sector available from Belgium (Flanders) and Poland in Annexes 1 and 2.

Additionally, there should be a further exploration of existing projects in the sector which might embrace the concept of RVAs.

It should be noted that many of these arrangements are based on the four elements of validation outlined above, and these elements are interrelated.

The European Inventory on Validation 2018 Update ²⁵ suggests that the key challenges for the future will be:

- Building on good practice and upscaling existing projects to meet the Council Recommendations;
- Better monitoring and evaluation of specific methodologies;
- Strengthening cooperation between the core areas of implementation: education and training, the labour market, the third sector;
- Long-term financial backing for the projects.

These should also be considered when exploring any future Active Leisure activity in this area.

Additionally the Study supporting the evaluations on the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ²⁶ provides further insight into the current general validation landscape.

Amongst other aspects the study found “future initiatives should consider the importance of developing validation arrangements in a comprehensive way to ensure their availability across all

²⁵ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

²⁶ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ea175fa5-ca31-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

levels of education and training, all occupational sectors in the labour market as well as the third or voluntary sector”.²⁷

This coupled with the suggestion that “there may be scope for a future EU-level intervention bringing together the principles of the the above mentioned council recommendation and those of related EU initiatives (e.g. Upskilling Pathways), to facilitate synergies between the areas of validation, labour market activation and lifelong learning”²⁸ would indicate the potential for Europe-wide coordination, exploration and data capture which the Active Leisure sector could engage with, or even lead.

7. Validation in the Active Leisure Sector

The specific application of the identified elements of validation in the Active Leisure Sector should be considered. These specificities should be addressed according to their order of appearance in the 4 key steps of the pathway corresponding to a Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) or more precisely to a Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) process; it should be noted that these 4 key steps should be considered, regardless of the model that may be chosen by the sector, for instance within the scope of a specific project.

As discussed earlier in the document (see p.4) the 4 key steps in the process of validation are:

1. Identification
2. Documentation
3. Assessment
4. Certification

7.1. Identification

This first step of the process, which aims at developing an awareness of prior achievements is generally speaking quite a challenge in that it requires to identify “*an individual’s learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning*”²⁹.

This should be established “*through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual*”³⁰ using such methodology as face-to-face interviews or ICT tools.

In the Active Leisure Sector in particular, this phase will raise a series of issues such as:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4117_en.pdf

³⁰ Ibid.

- The mere principle of RVA is still unknown by a large part of the population, in particular from the part that has remained dissociated from educational environments and higher education. This concerns a significant part of the Active Leisure employees, which consists in individuals who have trained no higher than EQF level 4 or 5 within a professional Vocational Education Training (VET) environment.
- Furthermore, professional culture is mainly determined around ‘hard skills’ that follow professional training and assessment and where the issue of ‘soft skills’ is widely un-addressed in educational systems and consequently difficult to identify.
- Identifying Learning Outcomes in this context will therefore requires information about the concept and assistance to carry out the process.

7.2. Documentation

The documentation consists *“to make visible the individual’s experiences”*³¹; in other words, the knowledge and skills need documenting through written or any other hard support evidence.

Here again, individuals generally employed within the Active Leisure Sector may face such issues as:

- The fact that their relative short and usually fragmented studies has not developed a tradition of paperwork handling. In this circumstance, employers who are also ‘in the field’ types of individuals, are not either very accustomed to processes managing, recording of data and other written processes;
- The importance of seasonality in quite a number of Active Leisure occupations and the mobility that is inherent to this situation, do not work in favour of developing habits in filing paper works;
- The reasonably young age of the employees who tend to pivot to another occupation after the age of 35/40 years of age does not help either to develop processes of paperwork handling.

For phases 1 & 2 (identification and documentation) the creation of an advising body may be necessary and key for the promotion and handling of the process.

7.3. Assessment

Next there is the assessment of these experiences that have been documented in the previous phase.

³¹ Ibid.

In many European countries, assessing is traditionally made by the deliverers who have carried out the courses followed by Active Leisure staff, within a context of small seasonal businesses. Furthermore, training in these environments is still largely based on hourly models constructed and referred to in terms of content and not in terms of Learning Outcomes.

This situation may raise the following hurdles:

- Prior learning may be perceived as corresponding to a learning path of a lesser quality than that consisting in following traditional professional courses. Traditional assessing bodies, which often also happen to be the professional certification bodies may resist to an external acquisition of Learning Outcomes;
- The general absence of Learning Outcomes in professional standards in use could lead to an excuse for not being able to establish comparisons between the individual's experiences and the situation of those who have followed the course;
- Where professional private training providers are in charge of assessment, there will inevitably be a financial issue linked to the assessment and recognition of individuals who aren't funding the process themselves;

A strategic way to facilitate the assessment of prior learning consists for the Active Leisure Sector to continue determining professional standards based on Learning Outcomes.

7.4. Certification

This phase consists of the "*certification of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification*"³².

The latter requires the existence of a credible authority and a national qualification system.

This final step may lead to the following issues:

- Many Active Leisure activities see their certification being organised by the sport sector which may not be inclined to certify soft skills that are inexistent in their own standards;
- Mutual recognition across Member States being based in reality upon traditional certification, certain historical training providers may be reluctant to certify individuals who do not conform with the traditional system.

The creation of an sector certification body, as is currently being discussed across the sector, may provide a solution to some of the issues mentioned above.

³² Ibid.

Of course, the issues mentioned above could each be developed in more details in order to address the difficulties that may occur in the implementation of an RVA process in the Active Leisure Sector, but they are described to give an idea about the fact that whichever system is chosen, it will have to be sufficiently robust and efficient to resist certain of these key issues.

8. Operational Components of Validation Systems

To explore the application of validation systems in Active Leisure it is possible to look at examples of good practice in a range of areas of implementation and operation. A framework of components accepted by Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) practitioners implementing programmes was shared at the 2019 VPL Biennale.³³ These components provide a useful model to further explore the implementation of VPL. The components are:

- Organisational arrangements
- Financing
- Procedures and Instruments
- Support structures
- Post-validation pathways
- Legal foundation

By using these components, it is possible to identify what might be necessary to work on within a validation programme to ensure a more successful outcome.

It is useful to use this model to share some examples of good practice taking place. Whilst these aren't necessarily currently in the Active Leisure sector it is possible to take the learning and use it when reviewing any potential systems being used in Active Leisure.

8.1. Organisational arrangements

It is clear from the exploration of the case studies that effective engagement with effective VPL processes requires an intentional approach by a number of parties. It requires support from the Member States, the sector, the validation or training organisations, employers, and the participants themselves. This support may come in a range of ways:

- philosophical / cultural – underpinning acceptance of the principles of VPL
- financial – allocation of money to support the programme
- workforce-based – allocation of staff to support the programme

³³ <https://vplbiennale.org/>

- temporal – allocation of time to explore and review the programme.

One model which might be worth exploring further for the Active Leisure sector is the Balancing Act Model identified by VIRKE in Norway.³⁴ This model, developed initially in the retail sector, suggest skills should be looked at by discussing the natural tension which might arise between People and Technology; Flexibility and Routines' and Pace and Presence. The model provides a way of understanding the skills which people may have, or may need, in a way which acknowledges the practical implications in the workplace.

Cork Institute of Technology³⁵ provides a good example of an education institution which has embedded a culture of validation in its own organisation, and supported employers to do the same.³⁶ This cultural acceptance of the importance of informal and non-formal learning, and the associated validation is imperative for the sustainability of any arrangements adopted or endorsed by the Active Leisure sector. The CIT programme can provide some guidelines on how to support organisations to embrace VPL.

Research in the VPL of internationally trained nurses looking to practise in Canada³⁷ also provides some useful guidance in that it suggests that it is the sector agencies of a given country who should lead the process, and this needs to be done on a voluntary basis to ensure the cultural change is embedded, and not driven by alternative agendas.

A potential partner for further exploration for how VPL might work in Active Leisure might be Finland. Their Sivis Study Centre³⁸ is an institute promoting non-formal adult education. Sivis is partly funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture and offers a collaboration across a number of government departments and sector organisations. An additional collaboration with the Active Leisure sector should be looked at to take advantage of their mature systems and embedded culture.

One additional aspect of organisational arrangements linked to VPL is the use of peer networks to review and engage with the process. This can have a significant impact on the workforce implications which can be influential in how successful arrangements can be. The Peer Review VNFIL Extended projects³⁹ provides some interesting and useful learning, especially when looking at transnational arrangements, however it is suggested this level of detail should be a progression within the Active Leisure sector depending in the national arrangements the sector chooses to explore.

³⁴ <https://www.virke.no/om-virke/>

³⁵ <https://extendedcampus.cit.ie/rpl>

³⁶ <https://sword.cit.ie/e3lcp/17/>

³⁷ <https://vplbiennale.org/download/2489/>

³⁸ <https://www.ok-sivis.fi/en/sivis-study-centre.html>

³⁹ <https://vplbiennale.org/download/2482/>

8.2. Financing

As identified above, effective VPL programmes require financial support. The financial sustainability of the programmes appears to be one of the biggest challenges of the existing programmes. They are reliant on relatively short-term funding. In time it might be felt that the VPL programmes will be subsumed into existing programmes. Whilst costs will continue to be there the activities, expectation and responsibilities would be embedded as best practice, and hopefully efficiencies found. Any developments in the Active Leisure sector should include modelling as to how the programme can become sustainable.

A range of projects can be explored to show the impact, aligned to investment.

The Ministry of Educations, Culture and Science in the Netherlands have done significant work to show the impact, both in terms of personal experiences and opportunities (Developmental Model), but also organisational and sectoral impact (Credit Exchange Model).⁴⁰

The French Model of VAE identifies a range of partners who might pay for certain aspects of the process, depending in the circumstances of the individual, and the priorities of the agency. The funding may come from the candidate themselves, central government, regional authorities, private companies or social partners. As with the example from the Netherlands, the French can provide clear evidence on the impact of the work. The value depends on the perspective of the funders.⁴¹

Iceland have chosen to centralise the administration and chose to subsidise for certain target groups at certain educational levels. If others want to access the system, they might have access to some vocational funds from certain social partners. They have found that counselling has been particularly importance for successful VPL. This model seems to be successful for Iceland's needs. The centralisation might be simpler in sectors / countries which smaller populations.⁴²

The real cost of any VPL arrangements in the Active Leisure sector should be monitored, even if these costs are subsumed be existing arrangements. This could follow the Flanders model to identify the costs. From their perspective they have a model identifying costed activities (Development, Introduction, Assessment, Aftercare) which aligns to the different stages of VPL (Identification, Documentation, Assessment, Certification).⁴³

⁴⁰ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/428/>

⁴¹ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/464/>

⁴² <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/92/>

⁴³ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/131/>

8.3. Procedures and Instruments

There are a range of procedures and instruments that can be used to support the VPL process. Many of those currently active in Europe have been explored as part of the research for this document. Most cover all four elements of VPL identified by Cedefop to differing degrees, albeit terminology differs across the different programmes. It would appear that this is the case regardless if the programme is focused on education, training and the world of work, or civil society (the categorisation of UIL).

Some of the notable projects are:

- The Skill Lab skills assessment app.⁴⁴
- The MySkills programme in Germany⁴⁵ – Currently the Active Leisure Sector professions aren't reflected however this could be explored.
- 'My Professional Experience' and associated cards⁴⁶.

There seems to be a common consensus that each Members States' arrangements are based in the same aspirations, but are implemented in quite different ways, and with potentially different priorities. A good example has been the comparative analysis, which outlines the similarities and the differences. The outcome is that the systems are quite different, and therefore challenging to compare.⁴⁷

A research piece on the quality within validation in Sweden, Denmark and Finland offers some useful information including the need for the procedures to be supported with good high-quality information, documents, and co-ordination.⁴⁸ This level of review continues to suggest the Nordic countries should be explored for collaborative work in the Active Leisure sector, however further research is required to ensure suitability for the Outdoors sector.

8.4. Support structures

As identified earlier, the research suggests the need for a holistic approach to VPL. This means even those organisations who aren't directly involved in the process can either become supportive or are supportive in their acceptance of the principles.

⁴⁴ <https://skilllab.io>

⁴⁵ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/94/>

⁴⁶ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/278/>

⁴⁷ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/348/>

⁴⁸ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/97/>

A particularly notable scheme is the “Cité des métiers”, which is seen as a space to deal with professional life, including transition within professional life.⁴⁹

Many examples in this area focus in on the links with existing or emerging counselling programmes (often career counselling). This aspect should be another which should be reviewed in any pilot activity in the Active Leisure sector engages in. The need to build additional capability and capacity in this area will offer challenges both financially and in the embedding of any VPL programme as the norm.

8.5. Post-validation pathways

There is a need to appreciate the place of VPL in the wider nature / aspects of lifelong learning. As with all aspects of VPL and Lifelong Learning, they do not operate in a vacuum, and the exploration of how they fit in the ‘bigger picture’ is something to consider. In many cases this centres on a portfolio which can be used on an ongoing basis to recognise and validate the learning which takes place over someone’s lifetime, regardless of role, organisation and sector.

This is another area which is dominated by technology and its emerging ability to provide continued support to learners outside of the formal environments.

The Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) portal developed by Chartall Business College in South Africa puts the learners at the centre of the process by ensuring they are able to interact with a range of elements of their processes: pre-RPL, during RPL, post-RPL and even as part of the wider system.⁵⁰

There are a range of e-portfolios which have started to provide potentially more user-friendly ways to collate the information required before, during and after the RPL process. An example of this is the portfolio work done by Libereaux.⁵¹

Another good example of a holistic approach to the RPL process can be found in the teacher training activities at Hogeschool Utrecht, Netherlands, where they embrace the different standards which different institutions and different people have (e.g., personal standards, qualification, standards, occupational standards).⁵² Similarly, to the Cork Institute of Technology, once embracing all agendas a system can be built to represent and align to all of them.⁵³

⁴⁹ <https://vplbiennale.org/download/2545/>

⁵⁰ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/74/>

⁵¹ <https://www.libereaux.nl/profile/>

⁵² <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/313/>

⁵³ <https://extendedcampus.cit.ie/rpl>

8.6. Legal foundation

The final element which we can explore practically is the legal foundation.

As mentioned previously the support offered by a range of organisations appears imperative to the success of any VPL system. Those members states which embrace the VPL concept and embed them into their statutory law, and those members states with regional governments who engage with VPL processes, are taking steps to change the culture, and positioning of lifelong learning, to embrace its importance in individual's motivation and progression. This should enable a 'normalisation' of recognising informal and non-formal learning and allow future generations to see this bona-fide learning experiences.

The French system enshrines Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) in law which then has led to an increase in learner expectation and an embedding of the principles in wider activities embraced by a range of stakeholders.⁵⁴ The legal embedding of RPL in Flanders, whilst not as mature as in France, has also been a focus over the last 20 years.⁵⁵ Here it is also becoming an expectation from the learners.

Each Member State has its own approach to how to embed RPL principles. Some of these involved enshrining in discrete laws, and some involve working with existing legal foundations and evolving them to accept RPL principles.

In any pilot activity the Active Leisure sector should include an exploration of the implications of the legal foundations from a sector specific perspective.

9. Recommendations

In the light of the above information the following recommendations are made for consideration:

- 9.1 The model of validation advocated by Cedefop is adopted as the framework for the Active Leisure sector.
- 9.2 The components of validation identified through the 2019 VPL Biennale are adopted as components of successful validation
- 9.3 There is acknowledgement that a single validation system for Active Leisure across all Members States would currently not be feasible.

⁵⁴ <https://vplbiennale.org/download/2498/>

⁵⁵ <https://vplbiennale.org/presentations/entry/675/>

This aligns with the engagement across NQFs for qualifications linked to the SIQAF project.⁵⁶ This should be reviewed at an agreed to time to consider future developments.

- 9.4 EuropeActive and EC-OE conduct an Active Leisure specific project with an appropriately engaged country.

This will allow the sector to learn from the validation experience, whilst mitigating the financial implications, and need for a specific workforce. It should be noted that anecdotally sector discussions have suggested there may be some key Member States to work with regarding the mobility agenda, and it might be possible to link with those Members States on the progress of this area.

- 9.5 Using the pilot project, the mechanism for future advice to Members States should be considered. This advice would include sector specific considerations for those developing and administering validation process. This exploration should include the identification of an existing or new organisation to support developing and offering this advice.

- 9.6 EQF level 4 Personal Trainer and EQF level 5 Outdoor Animator programmes should be a focus for any proposed project.

- 9.7 Any project has a clear purpose for validation.

It is recommended this is linked to the driving purpose of the Member States validation process but ideally should be working towards the ‘promotion of workforce development and participation in the labour market’.

- 9.8 There should be further exploration of the potential relationship with ECVET and ECTS as part of any proposed project.

- 9.9 These recommendations should continue to be reviewed in the light of the other recommendations from Active Leisure projects.

Throughout these recommendations we must acknowledge that, like with the NQF’s, validation must be embraced in a way which embeds the Member State’s approach and philosophy to education. As a result, there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution, however there may be a process which is built on specific principles which might support an efficient and effective approach. This might mean the further potential to develop a process underpinned by a set of principles, built on the existing ones in each Member State, which are specific to the Active Leisure sector.

⁵⁶ <https://www.europeactive-euaffairs.eu/projects/SIQAF>

10. Conclusion

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is an emerging concept. In the light of the 2012 Directive, Member States are at different stages of development of their systems to support this sort of validation. The increase in appetite and expectation for this sort of validation, coupled with evolution of technology to support it, suggests it is an area the Active Leisure sector must embrace and explore further.

The paper provides a framework for what 'good' might look like in validation procedures, as identified through other sectors. It recommends an initial relationship with one or two Member States to further explore how validation might work in practice in the Active Leisure sector.

Exploring the application of validation further in the Active Leisure sector will ensure not only that it is able to support existing workers in Member States, but also help to recruit the next generation of workers in way which fits with modern learning principles.

Appendix 1

Validation of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (BE)

Context

The competence for education in Belgium is regionalised. Hence, the Flemish agency (Flemish contact point) AHOVOKS.⁵⁷

The application for recognition and substantive support of a professional qualification lays with representatives of the labour market (professional organisations) and is supported by AHOVOKS.

Professional qualifications are validated and referenced to EQF by a validation committee composed of the interprofessional social partners complemented by AHOVOKS.

Prerequisite conditions for the validation of informal and non-informal learning

Every application for recognition of informal or non-formal learning will be compared with the relevant recognised professional qualification. Consequently, if a profession is not officially recognised (= not referenced against EQF) validation of informal or non-formal learning is not possible.

Validation of informal and non-informal learning is handled by a 'test centre'. The recognition of such a 'test centre' lies with the Flemish Department of Work and Social Economy.⁵⁸

Application procedure

The standard application for validation of informal and non-informal learning is a four-step procedure.

1st step: Contact a 'test centre'

This 'test centre' will guide and assist the applicant.

2nd step: Intake interview

The main objective of this interview is to create a 'skills portfolio' and to compare the portfolio with the existing professional competences.

⁵⁷ <http://www.ahovoks.be/agentschap-voor-hoger-onderwijs-volwassenenonderwijs-kwalificaties-en-studietoelagen>

⁵⁸ <https://www.vlaanderen.be/departement-werk-sociale-economie>

In case of a positive evaluation, the applicant can proceed to an assessment test.

3rd step: Assessment

The practical assessment is organised through an 'Assessment centre' and consists of a practical test including a role-play game, an interview, an interactive video and a knowledge test.

4th step: Validation

If successful, the applicant will automatically receive his or her 'qualification certificate'.

Financial implications

If the applicant is unemployed the procedure is free.

Otherwise, the maximum cost is €100.

Validation of informal and non-formal learning in Active Leisure

For the Active Leisure sector anno 2020, validation of informal and non-formal learning is only possible for Fitness.

Due to the official recognition by the Department of Work and Social Economy in 2019, the Fitness Organisation (Fitness.be) is financed by the VDAB (Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training) for the validation of the Fitness instructor certificate.⁵⁹

This 'official recognition' implies that the operational costs for running the 'test centre' are funded pro capita by the VDAB.⁶⁰

As (anno 2020) there is no Flemish 'test centre' for Outdoor qualifications, it is not possible to apply for validation of informal or non-formal learning within the Outdoor sector. It will be up to the employer federation BFNO⁶¹ to initiate the setting up of such a 'test centre'.

⁵⁹ <https://www.fitness.be/nl/trainers>

⁶⁰ During the period 2009-2019 the Fitness Organisation relied on funding from the European ESF program.

⁶¹ BFNO: Beroepsfederatie van Buitensportorganisaties.

Appendix 2

Validation of Personal Trainer Qualification in Poland based on the learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal education

The Polish Integrated Qualifications Register (ZRK) is a public register that collects information on all qualifications included in the Integrated Qualifications System, regardless of other registers and lists existing in Poland, created for the needs of individual ministries, industries, environments and institutions. The register was established in 2016 under the Act of 22 December 2015 on the Integrated Qualifications System and is one of the main elements of the system. From the ZRK, you can find out what specific requirements must be met to obtain a given qualification, and what institutions are authorized to certify it. The register includes the so-called full qualifications, i.e. those that are awarded only in the education and higher education systems, as well as partial qualifications, which include qualifications from vocational education, awarded after completing postgraduate studies, and also regulated, market and market in crafts qualifications.

All qualifications in the register must follow the same structure. Compulsory elements of the description are, inter alia, sets of learning outcomes with detailed learning outcomes and verification criteria. In a separate section, the requirements for validation and entities conducting validation are described, as well. All information is available on the official website of the system.⁶²

The requirements for the qualification of the Personal Trainer are presented below (ZRK, 2020). The qualification contains four sets of learning outcomes:

1. Characterizing the basics of the personal training process (theoretical set of learning outcomes)
2. Planning the process of personal training
3. Implementation of the process of personal training
4. Introducing the participant to a healthy lifestyle

Requirements for validation and entities carrying out validation

The following methods are used to validate the qualification of a personal trainer:

1. Theoretical test
2. Analysis of evidence of learning outcomes achievements
3. Interview of the candidate with the validation committee

The verification consists of the following stages:

Stage 1. A theoretical test, the recommended form is on-line test.

⁶² <https://rejestr.kwalifikacje.gov.pl/>

Stage 2. A presentation of the video recording of the training unit and presentation of the training plan in electronic form: a text document, a spreadsheet or website, supplemented with:

- a) Interview of the candidate with the validation committee, or
- b) Presentation of a portfolio (analysis of evidence confirming the achievement of learning outcomes, such as: diplomas of completing training or courses on conducting the personal training process, confirmed training effects of clients along with documentation of the training process, other documented results of work).

The verification of learning outcomes is carried out by the verification commission, composed of 3 members, including the commission chairman. Each committee member must have:

- a) diploma of graduation from a university in the field of sport and exercise science;
- b) documented 3-year activity in the fitness industry or in the field of personal training (within 6 years before sitting on the commission);
- c) a minimum of 3 years of documented experience in academic work, in particular in the field of sports training theory, physiology, anatomy, sport psychology and sociology, training systems design, marketing, communication or management in sport.

In particular, it is important to ensure the impartiality of experts who carry out the validation. Experts involved in the candidate's process of education and training are not allowed to be members of the verification commission.

The identification and documentation of learning outcomes

The body that performs the validation must provide the candidate with a support of an advisor during the identification stage and on the stage of documenting the learning outcomes.

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