

Digital curricula stories for all.

Tools and guidelines for adult educators

Report and comparative studies

(first draft – last update June 2013)

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Abstract

This report collects information from multiple sources, concerning the situation and the perception of competences and skills acquired in formal, non-formal and informal environments. Our purpose is to provide data on which to reflect within the project KValues, and specifically on the use of a particular methodology: the digital storytelling. First of all an European overview on the state of the art regarding the systems of validation, recognition and assessment of non-formal and informal learning is given. The data obtained from the research tools, both qualitative (interviews and focus groups) and quantitative (questionnaires), are used to present the perception of these topics and of the digital storytelling in various categories of people. Last, personal reflections are given on the material analysed and on the prospects for improvement of the problems found.

A Note on Methodology

The research combines the results of international references in the field of adult education with the existing practices in the countries involved, in order to understand whether the digital storytelling (DST) could be a useful tool for self and hetero validation of competences.

Therefore, the work is not only bound to the official procedures of certification to improve the employability. The research has included, in effect, the individual growth of people involved in the activity of DST, to see if it can be useful to:

- raise awareness of its competences;
- support the release of disadvantage and marginalization;
- help the establishment of a connection between the person and the world of work (even at different levels of career: from the entrance into the world of work to the betterment of the employment status within a company / sector).

Furthermore, the research has investigated the possibility that the social partners should take into account the use of validation tools for the recognition of those skills recognized as indispensable, but that still are not easy to identify and even to solicit in training and guidance contexts.

The research was conducted with quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (non-standard interviews and focus groups) methods, and involved very different groups and actors: from people without work and / or at a disadvantage, to workers in the field of human resources and to privileged actors (universities, representative categories, research centres). It also examined references and existing practices at European level.

The prospect of investigation is also linked to the social nature of the topic, very important for the Third sector still unprepared to accept or to drive the validation of competences, and their subsequent certification, by methods approved but independent of the for-profit ones.

Map of European Practices

The documents taken into account to trace this overview on the state of the art of European validation practices of competences are part of the bibliography at the site of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), dating back to 2010. They are divided into country reports for project partner countries, and case studies for other countries. Bulgarian and Swedish sections have been integrated with the reports directly produced by the project partners.

A first note on terminology, which appears to be a significant element in the process of standardization and unification of validation systems at the international level. In the documents examined, continual reference is made not only to validation of non-formal and informal learning, but also to a number of other concepts / systems that belong to the same semantic field but which are not interchangeable: Assessment of Prior Learning (APL), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). For ease of writing we preferred to refer to them by the simple acronym.

In the case of country reports we have tried to give a brief summary of what is present at the national level, both in terms of policy / legislative, and from the organization; then we have illustrated some experiences presented as practices or good practices. In the case studies we started from the illustration of the project and - if present - from its position in the political, legislative, administrative framework. In both cases, special attention was paid to methods and systems for validation, recognition, assessment of non-formal and informal learning.

Beyond the particularities of each country, the first general impression is that validation of non-formal and informal learning as a system requires first of all the presence of a National Framework of reference, with respect to the qualifications and standards to be used; and therefore that this National Framework is most suited to the European one. Only in this way can we hope for a share on the whole territory, as well as an easier portability of the practices among the various professional sectors. In countries where a National Framework is present, it turns out to be a point of reference on which to design and structure the rest of the system, also at the local level and for a single professional sector. Specific actions (recognition, validation and assessment) can then be decentralized and assigned to local authorities and institutions, but this element of centrality is hard to avoid.

With regard to assessment methods, an interesting element for the purpose of the project is that in most of the examined cases the portfolio could be considered as a powerful tool, as it can describe – in an adequately detailed overview – the formal and informal level of professionals skills of individuals.

Project Partners Countries

The situation within the countries participating in the project is very differentiated, presenting situations already structured and run towards the systematization and standardization of recognition, validation, assessment (Estonia), other ones where there is a tendency to an excessive fragmentation of rules and practices (Italy and Germany), and finally others still in the phase of design and construction (Bulgaria).

In **Bulgaria**, in effect, one of the weaknesses of the education system is the lack of a workable national strategy for the evaluation and validation of knowledge and skills acquired outside school. To overcome these problems, the Ministry of Education and Science is developing systems for recognition of formal and informal knowledge, skills and competences. Above all, many national and European projects have been launched in recent years, performing the function of framework of the processes under consideration. The most interesting ones are *Promoting adults' vocational training and employability in Bulgaria* (tested in three professions: carpenter, tailor, and social worker), and *Assessment and Recognition of Work Experiences and Non-formal learning*, about the

recognition of skills acquired by young people during their work experience. The most recent project, on February 2013, is *A new opportunity for my future*, with the aim of improving the opportunities for vocational training of the workforce, which will increase its capability and competitiveness of the labour market and facilitate labour mobility - both within the country and abroad.

On the contrary, in **Estonia** there is the situation more in line with European directives, especially thanks to a centralization of vocational qualifications which offers a unique orientation to the various training needs. The National Qualifications Framework (EKR) is built on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), with the same eight levels. The purpose of the EKR is to develop a framework encompassing all the qualifications of formal education as well as vocational ones. Among the activities planned in three strategic documents relating to vocational training (*Development Plan for the Estonian Vocational Education and Training System*, 2009-2013), Adult Education (*Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education* 2009-2013) and Higher Education (*Estonian Higher Education Strategy*, 2006-2015), the RPL plays a central role and systemic, going to be the real point of reference for validation of non-formal and informal learning in different educational contexts. Single universities have the task of drawing up its own rules and procedures for the use of the RPL system, taking into account the Standards for Vocational Training, which lay down general principles for the processes of validation, recognition and assessment. The still critical points of this system only concern the involvement of the private sector and the third sector, both in terms of implementation and of application. In both cases, however, there is a link with the RPL.

Germany does not have a legal framework nor a standardized system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Thanks to the allocation of public funds, in recent years many different systems have been developed, at regional and national level, for different target groups, with the result of describing the validation system in Germany as a multi-coloured mosaic of local, regional and national approaches. A Federal-Länder-Coordination-Group has begun to analyse specific curricula and other documents of exemplary German qualifications from general, higher and vocational education (in the metallurgical, electrical, commercial, health and IT fields), with the goal to classify all within the German Qualifications Framework (DQR). Relevant are also two initiatives: the ProfilPASS-system, that includes quality standards concerning instruments and methods, guidance and documentation; and DECVET (*Developing a German Credit System for Vocational Education and Training*), still under development, which aims to implement at national level the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (it includes ten projects that will serve as a vehicle for the development and testing of procedures for the accreditation of transferable skills and learning outcomes). Among the practices to be reported for the purposes of the KValues project there is one that regards the volunteer work, the *Kompetenznachweis Ehrenamt* (Certificate of competences for voluntary work).

Sweden does not have a fully developed system for validation of non-formal and informal learning, and indeed the responsibility for validation is highly decentralized to regional and local level, incorporated into the Adult Education system. Validation is based on the *Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning* (2004) and *European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning* (2009). In line with these, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, that is responsible for coordinating the system and support a national framework for validation, has formulated national criteria and guidelines for validation of real competence/prior learning. In order to coordinate other authorities concerned with developing model guidelines to support the industries and the education system in their validation work, and to provide guidance to providers of validation, the Agency has set up a number of networks: National forum for validation, Business sector network, Researcher network, Information group, Nordic cooperation. As observed in the Swedish report, there is no legal right for an individual to have his/her competence validated, and validation of informal and non-formal learning is predominantly summative, concerning assessment of specific competences against criteria related to a certain occupation. Only a few examples of formative validation focused on

general competences/key competences has been found. Despite this, there is an increasing interest in validation of informal learning, and there are several initiatives based on projects that provide a good level towards the systematization of the process, thanks to the collaboration of higher education institutions, municipalities, social partners, training organizations. In 2009 was established the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, who has the burden to develop a national structure for validation, and to build and adapt the National Qualifications Framework to the European one. Of interest, for KValues project, is the method used to recognize learning acquired by young people through volunteer work. This is the *Experience, Learning, Development* (ELD) method, based on portfolio, self-assessment and feedback, and carried out by facilitators specially trained from the Centre for International Youth Exchange (CIU). Participants must describe situations that occur during a project, recording their experiences through a journal, a blog, photos, or in any other way. The practice directly reported by the partner concerns the Liberal Adult Education, and specifically the Medlefors folk high school, whose validation model identifies seven competences (civic, social, intercultural, cultural, learning, communication, organisational-leadership) in four dimensions (knowledge and skills, competence to practice and act, ability to analyse, relate and value, initiative and result) and at different levels. The purpose of the model is not to validate in opposition to certain professional criteria, but to raise validated people's awareness about their current skills: this "consciousness-raising" – it is supposed – will strengthen self-esteem and make it easier to describe real competences when applying for studies or a job. The validation process is conducted in group to draw advantage of dialogue and support among the members of the group. The process is guided by two counsellors (one folk high school teacher used to identify and make assessments of knowledge and skills, and one study circle leader used to working with group processes).

Among the UK countries there are substantial differences with regard to the educational system, especially between Scotland and the rest. The system of governance for the Lifelong Learning, dating back at least to 1997, was immediately set in a decentralized way. In general, however, there is not a national approach to validation of non-formal and informal. There are methods and guidelines related to the National Qualifications Framework and developed in specific areas of learning (continuing education, higher education, etc.), but each administration has a separate qualifications framework, and the application of validation is transferred to the providers of learning, or to the departments in which they are composed.

At the end of 2011, in England, Wales, Northern Ireland it was established the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), inside which there is explicit mention of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Beyond this recent introduction and the National Qualifications Framework, there is a specific tool for vocational training introduced in the 80s and able to provide over 1300 qualifications based on skills: the Training National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Interesting examples are especially in the third sector, with European and national projects. The *South West Opportunities for Older People* (SWOOP) initiative supports older workers face to the discrimination in the labour market, trying to develop an e-Portfolio in order to recognize experiences, skills, attitudes and proclivities of people and help them to access to employment. As part of the Volunteering, the SOUL (*Soft Outcomes Universal Learning*) Record aims at the development of an online toolkit supported by training courses for users and for trainers. In the private sector, an interesting practice for KValues is developed by the construction industry: the *On-Site Assessment and Training* (OSAT) is a summative method of assessment to qualify workers with experience, and to convert their skills in a National Vocational Qualification. The worker is supported by an evaluator to build a portfolio of evidence testifying his skills.

In Scotland too there is a connection between the Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and RPL, and the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) are based on the same English standard. Each standard is divided into units, and each unit into elements describing the tasks to be done to be considered capable of carrying out the planned activities. Very interesting are the guidelines in the *SCQF Handbook* which can be applied in all sectors of education and training, even in Higher Education, and the implementation of the SCQF made by the Scottish Social

Services Council (SSSC), in a project conducted between 2006 and 2008. Target of the project were workers with lack of confidence in their ability to learn and workers reluctant to undertake formal learning courses. The purpose was not so much the acquisition of qualifications, but the preparation to the acquisition of skills by building self-confidence and by developing reflective abilities. All activities were led by a mentor supporting the learning process of the students, both individually and in groups. Peer groups work was considered very important.

Practices in Other European Countries: Case Studies

In the other European countries analysed, the general situation is similar to that above-described, with cases more advanced from a systemic point of view (especially Finland, Denmark and Norway) and other ones in which the process is still in progress or in the early stages. Even the general considerations reflect those already discussed, both with regard to the need for a policy that gives rules and regulations at least at national level, both concerning the assessment tools most interesting for KValues project (the portfolio, in its traditional and online version).

Here are two practices that are more congenial to the purposes of the project. One is the Norwegian project *Validation of prior learning in prison education*, realized between 2007 and 2009, which involved the inmates of six prisons without secondary education qualifications or work. The aim was to use the Assessment of Prior Learning to offer them an education customized to their background and their needs, to encourage them to continue their education and develop their ability to work, in order to be rehabilitated into society. Validation of detainees prior learning has been seen as a key element, considering that most of them had no formal qualifications but was still able to carry out certain work activities (construction, painting, etc.) learned even in contexts of undeclared work. The practical dimension of the APL was able to motivate these subjects, and moreover part of the teachings could be recognized just thanks to the validation obtained. Validation was carried out with reference to the National Qualifications Framework and by using a method based on dialogue (with interviews on educational and work background and on the language skills of the inmate), integrated by written documentation, photos, etc. (a portfolio). In some cases, the inmate has been tested with practical proof on skills and expertise, assessed by a skilled professional. An exemplary history is that of Peter, who has managed to rebuild a career as a carpenter by obtaining in a short time a certificate of qualification, thanks to the demonstration through photos of how he had been able to build his own house.

The other case of interest is represented by a private sector initiative. This is the *Vocational Qualifications Programme* (VQP), carried out by Philips Electronic Nederland and four trade unions, targeted at skilled employees who have no formal qualifications. It was born in 2004, first funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and now financed by the company, in order to increase the knowledge and the skills of employees in a context of organizational and productive restructuring. Against the need of reducing staff and, therefore, dismissal, it looks like a preventive approach, because instead of addressing the problem only from the economic point of view (with compensation for dismissal, redundancy payment, etc.), its purpose was the requalification of redundant staff in order to facilitate their employment in other areas of the company or outside the company. Participants are involved in training workshops called *Learning Works*, in which they are encouraged to reflect on themselves and their future, and on the fact that training can help them to improve their position in the labour market. Interviews are made, and a special attention is devoted to questions such as "Who am I?", "What am I good at?" and "What do I want to achieve?". During the workshops practical information are also provided on training opportunities on the local labour market. At the end, the participants are helped to draw up a personal action plan, by identifying concrete steps that have already been made and steps yet to be accomplished.

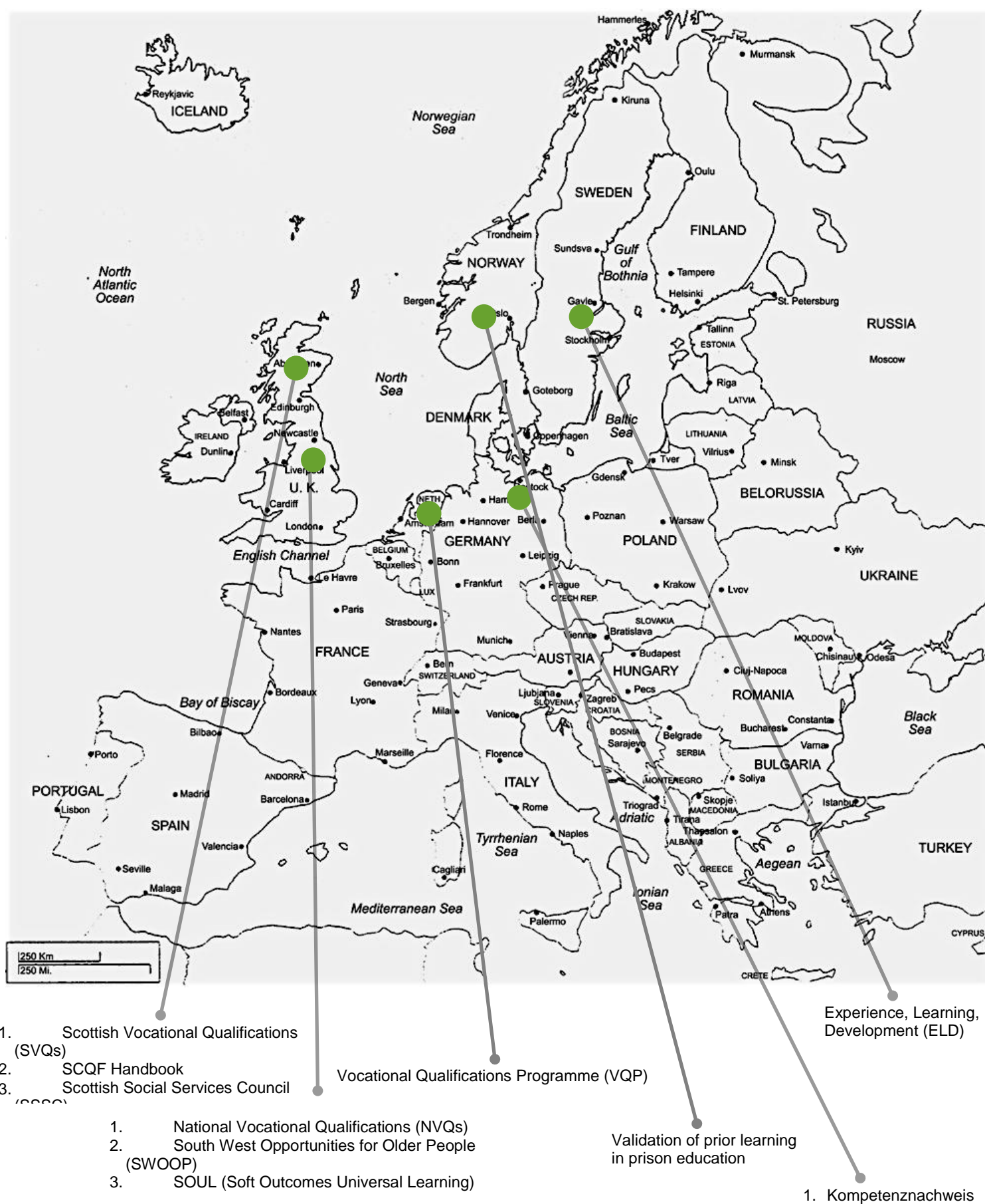
Shared Practices in Europe

An example of practice already established at European level and considered as international tool is the *Youthpass*. It is a tool to visualise and validate learning outcomes acquired in *Youth in Action* projects, a part of the strategy of the European Commission to encourage the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Used from 2005 to 2007, it is now a third sector initiative funded by the European Commission, and is recognized as a major political initiative within the Europe 2020 Strategy. In particular, this project demonstrates how important is the involvement of stakeholders in the development of a new validation process.

Without going into detail, we first list the ways in which young people and youth workers can benefit from this tool: by creating a certificate, *Youthpass* describes what young people and youth workers have done in their project and which competences they have acquired; by documenting the added value of a *Youth in Action* project, it visualises and supports active European citizenship of young people and youth workers; being a Europe-wide validation instrument, it contributes to strengthening the social recognition of youth work; by making visible and validating key competences through a certificate, it aims at supporting the employability of young people and youth workers.

Assessment of the activities in which it's currently possible to participate (*Youth Exchanges, European Voluntary Service, Youth Initiatives, Training Courses*), is based on a portfolio approach which uses the EU Key competences as a framework to define learning outcomes, and can be described as a dialogue process between a participant and a co-worker (youth worker/leader, trainer, social worker). There is no standard for the assessment process: the "assessors" are the participants themselves and their co-workers.

A Map of the Best Practices



Focus on Practices in Italy

General Framework

For Italy, two basic data must be considered:

- different actors use the same words with different meanings;
- the population involved in training activities is lower than the European quota.

This framework includes procedures, systems and models of validation of competences from experience, evolved with paths not always structured and causing spatial diversity. Lifelong learning is considered as a fundamental human right, in line with the European developments of the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process related scenarios, that recognize the continuing education as an individual right of the subject to take advantage of opportunities that will enable his growth and development. Anyway, the overall picture is very fragmented.

The instrument used throughout the national territory is the *Libretto Formativo del Cittadino* (*Citizen's Training Book*), an institutional document established in 2005 to enhance and facilitate the “marketability” of the competences acquired in learning and professional development processes. The purpose of the *Libretto Formativo* is to collect-rebuild, organize and support:

- the different learning experiences made in education, in training activities, at work and in everyday life;
- the results of these learning experiences in terms of acquired competences.

Until now, the formalization and implementation of institutional systems and instruments for validation of non-formal and informal learning in Italy was accomplished only at the regional level. The single regional situations, however, are different and are classified as:

- regions with complete and working systems of validation and certification (Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Piedmont, Lombardy, Aosta Valley);
- regions with formalized and regulated strategies but not yet fully implemented (Lazio, Liguria, Marche, Veneto, Umbria);
- regions with interesting experiences and experimentations, but to different degrees of progress (all the others).

The most recent legislation regarding “the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning and minimum service standards of the national system of certification of competences” dates from the beginning of this year (Legislative Decree no. 13 of 16 January 2013 entered into force on 2 March 2013). It outlines a national system of certification in order to enhance any competence of the person, in a lifelong learning perspective and according to national minimum standards that ensure the validity of what is certified, and thus its marketability. The Decree is linked to the reform of the labour market and defines lifelong learning as an “individual right”. Some points for the practical implementation, however, are yet to be solved.

Companies and Third Sector

Also for companies the situation is fragmented: in those cases in which a validation process takes place within the enterprise, the more real problem is the portability of the competences and of the validation model.

In companies that have a more “social” vision of the assessment/validation system of skills, the central aspects are:

- the social value of the competence, understood in the enterprise system as a function of the plurality of processes that oversee the management of the staff, and more generally the development and enhancement of human resources;
- the ability of validation, assessment and certification instruments to effectively influence the enterprise system and the life cycle of the worker-citizen;
- the (successful) experiential factors that can generate and re-generate individual and collective learning in work contexts.

The benefits obtained from this “social” approach to validation are:

- the design of individual training plans;
- the connection with the employment centres where the same method is used;
- the finalization of the action to a concrete development of employability of workers.

On the other hand, the problems concern:

- the resistances to publish relevant information related to the organization and the business plans;
- the times and costs of management, in lack of specific non-corporate funds;
- the presence of skills not easy to transfer to other corporate contexts.

Regarding the Italian third sector, from 2004 to 2010 it was conducted a survey of on-going trials consistent with the methodological framework of the validation process indicated by Cedefop. It can be summarized as follows:

- reconstruction of individual experience;
- use of a stock of professional standards as reference;
- assessment phase;
- final act of certification.

Success and Hindering Factors

The experiences that can be defined as successful were able:

- to be clear on the design and purpose of validation and the needs of the recipients;
- to think carefully about the value to be attributed to the results of validation with regards to the institutional system in which the experience has been done; it must be clear from the beginning if at the end there will be a certification, a credit, a signed certificate with possible further value or only limited in the labour market;
- to establish a partnership for the process management formed by multiple actors, public and / or private, whose roles are clearly defined in relation to their competences;
- to take, in an explicit and transparent way, a reference for standards or stocks of skills to be validated. This reference can be made to existing catalogues or constructed ad hoc, but it is an essential element to be declared;
- to pay attention to the economic sustainability of validation process; in other words the design of the process must be not too expensive and can be operated even with limited resources;
- to build a methodological path broadly characterized by a pattern in four phases (analysis, standards, assessment, certification), each of which requires operators or actors skilled for its management.

Common obstacles to the promotion of validation activities were:

- the legal value of qualifications obtained through formal education and training;

- the traditional weakness of continuing and adult education, which in Italy is not widespread and established as well as in other European countries;
- the lack of a unified national system of qualifications and competences, although there are systems at regional level;
- the plurality of the institutions involved in this matter at the national and regional levels.

The data of empirical research

Empirical research was carried out by Bulgaria, Estonia, Italy and Sweden. It was conducted with quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (focus groups, in-depth interviews) methods. The Estonian results will be integrated in the final report.

At all stages of research, the respondents were representative of the categories potentially interested by KValues project:

- Category 1: *Adults, Young adults in disadvantage conditions, Unemployed, Inactive people;*
- Category 2: *Manager in Education and training sector, expert in validation that work in Local government; Assessment centres; Vocational Schools; Universities; Specialist recognition centre;*
- Category 3: *Business managers, human resource managers, trade union representatives, responsible recruitment in cultural/third sector.*

The results of qualitative research

Bulgaria

For the focus group panel, 11 stakeholders from various sectors have been selected:

- Education and training sector: Local government, Universities
- Business sector: Business managers, Human resource managers
- Voluntary sector: Communities, NGOs, Associations
- Moderator from HuMan Institute for Humanistic Management Bulgaria

Discussion outputs

On validation of informal competences

1. The focus group panel agreed that validation of informal competences has become an important issue for lifelong learning vision and strategy. It was discussed how different settings outside of the formal learning and training situations can benefit the development of new competences. The non-formal elements of such educational situations (especially in terms of learning time and objectives) were noted as key points that have to be taken into account both from an individual (the learner's) and from institutional (the provider's) point of view.
2. The mapping of the full range of competences and capabilities held by an individual has been pointed out as one of the key aspects of the validation process. One member noted that only through such process of a conscious competence analysis one can be aware of the own abilities and thus get recognition on multiple levels (personal and professional).
3. A major point that emerged from the discussion was that it is, after all, up to the individual to assess its own experiences and competences acquired and thus be aware of any shortcomings that can be overcome through non-formal learning practices.
4. Some members of the focus group pointed out that the competence analysis – whether done by the individual or on an institutional level – have to be closely linked to the requirements of the labour market.
5. In the discussion it has been pointed out that competences acquired through informal learning practices cannot substitute formal education; they can, however, greatly improve the professional and personal recognition of an individual.
6. The group agreed that, at least in Bulgaria, the visibility of such programs is a major challenge. In Bulgaria, one member noted, the view of education is a very traditional one

and the benefits of what people can learn outside formal education and vocational training should be more clearly communicated. According to some members, there ought to be better communication between the authorities and the institutions on the one side and the private sector and the public on the other.

7. A member of the focus group who is professionally involved with the application of educational practices noted that very limited experience has been accumulated in Bulgaria regarding non-formal and informal education; therefore, introducing such programs would be also a challenge but also an advantage because of the pioneer effect.
8. Another challenge in Bulgaria, which has also been recognized as a global problem, is the validation of informal competences among disadvantaged groups. The members agreed that such groups should be supported on institutional level (top-down) in contrast to other individuals where the process could be designed as a two way street (bottom-up and top-down).
9. Some participants expressed the view that Bulgaria delayed the introduction of a comprehensive national strategy and institutionalized forms of recognition of skills and knowledge acquired outside formal education.

On the DST methodology

10. While valuing its benefits, the focus group agreed that the digital storytelling methodology is a generally unknown tool in Bulgaria. According to one member of the focus group, the methodology has limited practical applications in the country among its targeted audience. The majority of the group, however, agreed that digital storytelling tools are a valuable addition to people's competences and that they can be applied in a variety of professional fields.

Italy

In Italy a focus group was conducted and non-standard interviews were carried out on the following points of interest:

- the identification of competences to be validated (mapping);
- the identification of areas of validation for the selected competences (with self-assessment tools);
- the DST as a means of validation;
- the analysis of the questionnaires.

Overall, the research confirms the literature data with regard to the terminology (complex and often “ambiguous”), the non-systematic way of actions and procedures, the difference in approach between for-profit and non-profit worlds.

The competences explicitly mentioned as indispensable were:

- participation (being involved and knowing how to involve);
- working in groups;
- being builders of social relations;
- ability to network both online and offline;
- working with new media;
- knowing how to be in a relationship and a group;
- knowing how to stand in front of a screen to perform a job, even repetitive if necessary;
- respect for the hierarchy;
- knowing how to live and work within complex contexts;
- problem solving;

- communication skills;
- language skills;
- ability to draw attention to a topic, on itself and on its activities;
- learning to learn (basic principle of all other skills. Methods and learning strategies are essential to adult life, professional and not);
- ability to invest in itself (in part linked to the previous one, but that is also expressed in entrepreneurial activities and in a good level of creativity);
- dimension of values (even if it leads to problems for assessment / validation, it is an important aspect because closely related to motivation);
- copying, that is the ability to respond proactively to different situations (determinant in complex professional contexts).

It should be emphasized that the competences object of interest depend on the subject: the labour market is very much inclined to require competences that are useful and expendable, even if not internal to a larger vision of citizenship. On the contrary, the institutional and non-profit world looks at social needs. From this it follows that private sector is more interested in certification, while the latter are oriented on validation.

However, the DST is an object of interest on the part of all involved, hailed as a promising tool (although not well known) both for the identification of competences and for their validation, in principle compatible with the certification procedures.

The elements identified as interesting in the DST are the narrative of its own history, and the “digital” nature of the methodology, which defines it as very well coded and wider (in the sense of using the multimedia and digital language).

The topic is inscribed within the broader issue of how the narrative of self can be a mode and a method to retrieve aspects of its own experience, for enhancing the non-formal and informal competences and bring them to certification. This methodology seems to be particularly effective for soft skills, but it could also be good for other skills. Indeed, the DST has *self-reflective*, *expressive* and *transformative* features, that make it useful also to work on the motivations and the values of the person who is telling. It allows a more sophisticated approach that can generate both personal and social transformation. The DST has therefore an added value that resides in the following potentialities:

- transformation;
- evaluation (e.g., you can execute a ladder or a series of actions for self or hetero evaluation);
- narration;
- self-reflection.

The stories have an expressive function because they bring out the subjective aspect and emotional (the passion). With the other methods is harder to capture these qualitative dimensions. There is a respect of historical, motivational and value-driven meaning: a story tells a lot more than a method only based on rational elements. And this is true both for the person who tells (self-reflexive function) and for the person to whom the narration is addressed (expressive function).

The motivational aspect (also linked to the values) is important for people and for workplaces, but it is underestimated in the public discourse. Even the current crisis leads to think that doing a job for which there is an intrinsic motivation is just a luxury, when in fact it would be a benefit for both the worker and the business world. Therein lies a huge potential of the DST: the transformative element changes from individual to social characteristic.

The problems identified for the execution of the DST are related to a low level of media literacy and to the digital divide, as well as to the many variables (e.g.: Age) of people who need to make a balance of competences and / or recognize them (validate and / or certify).

Sweden

An interview has been conducted with the National Validation Coordinator and a focus group has been convened. The focus group included representatives from the Public Employment Service, the National Council of Adult Education, the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company, TRR and the Multicultural Center in Botkyrka.

General observations

- There is no legal right for an individual to have his/her competence validated;
- Validation of informal and non-formal learning is predominantly summative and concerns assessment of specific competences against criteria related to a certain occupation;
- Only a few examples of formative validation focused on general competences/ key competences has been found;
- There is an increasing interest in validation of informal learning;
- Observed shortcomings in validation system: a) need for a sustainable system to finance validation, b) no general recognized framework for quality assurance, c) lack of relevant training courses for validation practitioners;
- Two interrelated problems of special relevance to validation of general competences/key competences at the present stage: a) legitimacy (the forward development must involve all relevant stakeholders in order to reach a common understanding and standard), b) common definitions and structuration of competences (different models use different ways to define general competences; risk for incompatible models),
- Importance of seeing the validation process as a learning experience in itself, especially when validating key competences.

A decentralised structure with many actors

Validation of real competence/prior learning can be used within the education system against certain course criteria/expected learning outcomes to give a person access to or shorten an education, usually following upper secondary education. Validation can also be used against specific criteria connected to a certain job/profession. These criteria are set up by the sector organisations. A third form of validation, which is not treated in this report, is validation of foreign (formal) education. This is done by the Council for Higher Education.

Learning contexts involved in validation of informal and non-formal learning are: adult education at the municipal level, higher vocational training, higher (academic) education, the Public Employment Service, sector organisations, liberal adult education ("folkbildning").

The results of quantitative research

Only Bulgaria, Estonia and Italy have submitted the questionnaire. Each country had the opportunity to revise the questionnaires and therefore in some cases there have been more or less questions, in other ones the questions were slightly different. However, overall 90% of the questionnaires was the same for both countries. Not everyone answered all the questions.

On the whole, the responses related to the DST show that this is not a known method, but there is a genuine openness to the possibility of improving knowledge and experience on it. The category that displays much "prudence" in its efficacy, it is in general the third one.

Shown below are the most significant questions and responses, subdivided by category.

Estonian results will be matched and integrated in the final report.

Category 1

51 people responded: 24 in Bulgaria (more men than women: 58%), 27 in Italy (more women than men: 74%). The age group with more participation in both cases is 26-35, with an average of around 58% between Bulgaria and Italy. It is interesting to note that in Italy the second largest age group is the one from 36 to 45, while in Bulgaria that from 15 to 25, maybe sign of a labour force with different employability. With regard to the territorial origin, in Bulgaria the overwhelming majority comes from cities (79%), in Italy from towns (74%). Even the work situation presents significant differences: in Bulgaria the majority of respondents is *Student*, followed by *Employed full time* and *Unemployed*; in Italy, the percentage of the unemployed people grows slightly (from 33% to 37%), while employees full time decrease from 42% to 22%, and students from 54% to 4%. On the other hand, the presence of retired rises from 0 to 33%.

In the section on competences and their validation, the first question of interest concerns the perception of the success factors in job search: in both cases *Professional skills* prevail, while the second place shows a difference (*Attributes and qualities* for Bulgarians, *Other skills and specific knowledge* for Italians). Quite similar, on the contrary, the findings about the acquisition of attributes / skills: the highest percentage (average of 87,5%) is for the *On-the-job experiences*, followed by *Formal learning*. When it comes to validation, however, the differences return to be substantial: while in Italy, 79% say knowing what validation of competences means, in Bulgaria, only 52% answer yes. A high percentage of Italians and Bulgarians says to have found a job without having to certify non-formal competences (average 73%), that is just as high about the desire to certify new competences (80% on average with a 100% in Italy), demonstrating a certain contradiction about the role of certification.

The last section of the questionnaire is related to DST. The average between the two countries shows that it is not a well-known method (about 57% knows it), but the situation is opposite in the two countries: in Bulgaria, 77% answer not to know it, while in Italy the 60% claim to know. The situation is realigned with the last question, since in both cases almost all of the participants is interested to deepen the understanding of this method, and more than half would like to try.

Category 2

It should be said immediately that in this case only 4 people responded in Bulgaria, and 22 in Italy. For this reason, a comparison between the two countries makes little sense, because it would be unreliable. The percentage regarding the gender mirrors that of the first category, with more males in Bulgaria (75%) and more females in Italy (54%), but in this case the average is a fifty to fifty. As expected, the average age rises: the two most numerous ranges are 36-45 (58%) and 56-64 (27%). About the education of the participants, the majority area of origin is the same (*Humanistic*, 65%), and the level reveals a certain prevalence of Post-graduate (68%, mainly due to 75% in Italy). Regarding the area of organization in which respondent works, 2 out of 3 are in the field of Education, and about half from more than 20 years.

For what concerns the acquisition of competences, and specifically the perception on the more effective learning environments, the responses indicate a very high level both for formal learning (77%) than for non-formal / informal (81%) and for on-the-job (65%). The importance given to hobbies and interests confirms the prevalence of informal dimension (88%, albeit with very different values for the two countries). The questions about validation of competences lead into the merits of the objectives of the research: the answers are rather clearly aligned with the data obtained from the other survey instruments, both with regard to the potential that the critical issues. The weaknesses of validation of non-formal and informal learning are in fact mainly identified in the *Lack of a legal framework for validation processes* (56%) and in the *Poor access to information about validation procedures* (48%), while the most suitable methods turn out to be the *Observation* and the *Digital Portfolio* (both 52%). Beyond some differences between the two countries, the other answers give considerable importance to the non-formal / informal aspect, with regard to the job

search (92%), as well as to the need of making the process of self-evaluation as independent as possible (85%).

The part relating to DST is quite comparable with the data of the first category. Only half of the respondents, in fact, claims to have heard of or experienced the digital storytelling methodology and 2/3 of them have found it useful. In the whole, there is still some interest in experimenting it (57%).

Category 3

Respondents were 40: 13 in Bulgaria and 27 in Italy. The general data are quite in line with those of category 2: there is a substantial equality in gender (55% males, 45% females) with a male predominance in Bulgaria (61%); 36-45 is the prevalent age group (48%); the area of education is especially *Humanistic* (40%); the main area of organization in which respondents work is in the field of *Education* (although the percentage drops to 50%), and generally from more than 10 or 20 years. On the contrary, the percentage of *Post-graduate* decreases slightly (about 44%).

The answers concerning the acquisition of competences reveal similarities with both categories. As for the first one, the *On-the-job experiences* are considered the most important (82%) and are followed by *Formal* and *Non-formal / informal* learning (both at 68%). As for the second category, a great emphasis is given to hobbies and interests (87% on average, with a 100% in Italy). Uncertain answers are given to the specific question on the ability of potential employees to effectively utilize the informal/non formal experiences they've had to demonstrate their capacities: 44% have a positive view, 47% not, sign of a general request for unique and shared validation systems. Turning to validation of competences, the lack of digital portfolio as effective methodology is the first data of interest; more confidence is given to observation (74%) and simulation (68%). This is perhaps due to the fact that portfolio had and still has a more widespread use in the contexts related to education. The last answers on validation are again aligned with the second category: non-formal learning / informal is decisive for the job search (97%, with a 100% in Bulgaria), and self-evaluation is considered as an essential element (87%).

The knowledge of the DST is very low: 74% say not to know it and, among them, more than half (52%) do not know if it could be useful. Even in the remaining 26%, scepticism about its usefulness is high: 47% against 53% of positive perception. These data, however, take a very different value if dropped in the two national contexts. It is especially in Bulgaria, in fact, that there is a lack of references on the DST: 83% say not to know what it is, and among those who have experienced it nobody knows if it would be useful.

Final Considerations

The elements that have contributed to build this report are many and different, but the overall picture that emerges is rather homogeneous and consistent. Both the literature already available, that the various forms of investigation carried out, return a European scene still highly fragmented and at different speeds, starting from the glossary used.

The impression is that not everyone has the same thing in mind when it comes to validation, recognition and assessment, and guidelines distributed and reformulated by Cedefop in the last 5-6 years do not seem to have a sufficiently large penetration in shared imagination.

It's a first aspect that should probably be faced (or re-examined) in a collaborative way, involving more people in different countries and making them work through shared tools and methodologies.

Beyond this, the key issue about the process of systematization of validation, recognition and assessment practices can be described in a double movement: on the one hand the need to centralize or to define standards, regulations, qualifications, best practices, common definitions and structuration of competences, able to act as a point of reference at least at the national level, but having a close relationship with what the EU has already made available (see the European Qualifications Framework); on the other hand, this centralization should give way to a delocalization of the actors responsible for these practices: the authorities and the institutions that can ensure quality and safety in processes must be identified in the territory, also to create a closer relationship and greater recognition to those individuals who are potentially interested more than others to shape and emphasize their skills.

Another important aspect concerns the involvement of all stakeholders, from the public to the private to the third sector: it is a question of legitimacy, as it is to reach a common understanding and standard. In countries where this has been done from the beginning (that is from the design of regulations, documents, training activities, projects), the results are generally better, both from the point of view of efficiency of the process, and - above all - about the perception of the people involved in respect of issues still not particularly well known: the concepts of non-formal and informal learning are not as widespread as it should be, at least in some national or local contexts, and the first step useful in these cases is precisely what leads an individual to self-recognize his potential and skills already possessed.

In this framework, the methodology of the DST for validation and certification of competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, even if not well known, receives attention, especially for elements that bind it to the possibility of individual and social growth. This makes it a tool more interesting for the third sector, but in no case was excluded the possibility that it can also be used for certification.

Undoubtedly, this methodology is accepted with openness, thanks to its evaluative and transformative potential, both at individual and social level.

From the individual point of view, one of the most significant features of DST is to foster awareness on the part of the person involved on his own competences and skills, and to make him feel his work and his life as a learning environment. The approach, in short, is holistic and intends learning as an empowerment of the subject in its entirety, in his being a man/woman as well as a worker. By reading the literature on these matters, but more generally by the European guidelines for training, the feeling is that the viewpoint is focusing too much on productivity, namely on a criterion that is not always winning or significant from the educational perspective. If the starting point and the viewing angle is primarily, if not exclusively, in the labour market, and if we ask the labour market what are the necessary skills and competences, the risk may be twofold: on the one hand everything is calibrated according to the utilitarian logic of cost-benefit and return on investment, a logic that - if not combined to something else suitably strong from the cultural point of view - leads to inequality and social issues, paradoxically hindering the access to employment; on the other hand, and specifically for this project, the benefits and prerogatives of the methodology

used may be affected, as a person might end up putting in evidence, telling of himself, only those competences and skills that are marketable at a certain moment.

That is why the DST, and storytelling in general, should be considered not only as an operational tool, but as an instrument of change.

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