Building synergies between Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning and the Upskilling Pathways Initiative

Introduction

This note is based on the first discussion on possible synergies between Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) and Upskilling Pathways (UPs) that took place at the EQF-AG of 14-15 June 2017.

The aim of this note is to inform the discussion that will be continued at the EQF-AG of 4-5 October 2017. The note describes the states of play of both the Recommendation on VNFIL and the Recommendation on UP, suggesting possible synergies in implementation. Participants will have the possibility to give further information on existing synergies between validation and upskilling at national level and give suggestions on initiatives that can be taken at EU level.


Through the 2012 Recommendation Member States agreed to put in place validation arrangements by 2018, allowing individuals to obtain a qualification (or parts of a qualification) on the basis of validated knowledge, skills and competences. By the end of 2017 the first Member States will present to the EQF Advisory Group their one-off reports on national validation arrangements implementing the Recommendation.

The Commission and Cedefop have produced revised European Guidelines in 2015 and updates (in 2014 and 2016) of the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. Among the findings of the 2016 Inventory are that validation arrangements are in place in 35 of the 36 countries covered, that increasing links exist between these arrangements and national qualifications frameworks and systems and that there is a significant increase in the number of countries with skills audits in place. On the other hand important challenges concern the development of professional competences of staff involved in validation and reaching disadvantaged groups.


2. State of play of the 2016 Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways

Upskilling pathways are targets adults with a low level of skills, knowledge and competences without upper secondary education. people in this target group rarely
participate in life-long learning, e.g., due to lack of motivation or lack of information about its benefits or the possibility of validation of their existing skills and competences.

The aim of Upskilling Pathways is to increase literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or upskill to a qualification at EQF level 3 or 4. Upskilling Pathways consists of three key steps: (1) skills assessment; (2) providing a learning offer and (3) validation and recognition.

**Objectives:**
- improve employment opportunities and overall life chances of adults with low levels of skills (e.g. adults without upper secondary education) in Europe
- contribute towards the objective of up-/re-skilling the whole workforce
- enhance social inclusion and cohesion for adults struggling with basic skills

**Process of implementation:**

The Recommendation calls on Member States to develop a linked series of targeted interventions, establishing a 'pathway', that should improve and consolidate support targeted at low skilled/low qualified adults. It provides a coherent framework for action to upskill this target group based on the following principles:

- structured, coherent approach to address the low skills challenge bringing together in a common framework a wide variety of interventions in this field
- removing obstacles to adults' participation in upskilling programmes through a three step logic:
  - a skills assessment, to identify existing skills and upskilling needs;
  - a learning offer designed around this assessment; and
  - opportunities to have skills acquired, validated and recognised towards a qualification at EQF level 3 or 4.

These three steps will be accompanied by guidance, outreach and support measures such as awareness raising on the benefits of upskilling and opportunities available, incentives for those least motivated to take advantage of these.

Delivery will be based on existing structures, building on what already exists; better coordination among different actors will be promoted to this end. COM will support MS financially by using existing funds – especially ESF. According to the national contexts, countries may decide to focus on those target groups that are considered relevant at national level (employed or unemployed workers, migrants, younger cohorts of adults who are not eligible for the Youth Guarantee, etc.). By the end of 2018, COM will report on measures delivered at national level. In 5 years, COM will report on progress.

3. **Outcome of the first discussion in the EQF AG of 14-15 June 2017**

COM presented possible synergies between VNFIL and Upskilling Pathways at the EQF-AG meeting of 14-15 June 2017 followed by an open discussion.

A key message was to create and reinforce links between the Upskilling Pathways and validation Recommendations. Three questions were asked to the EQF AG members: (1) Where do you see opportunities for building synergies and coordination between UPs and VNFIL arrangements? (2) Are such initiatives discussed at national level? (3) How can the 2018 reporting exercises on VNIL and UPs reinforce each other?

Overall the EQF-AG was positive about building synergies and coordination between Upskilling Pathways and validation arrangements. Currently links between both initiatives at national level are not always clear. Some Member States have already established a system of validation side-by-side with an initiative on upskilling; others have fully embedded upskilling initiatives in the validation arrangements. It was suggested that as one enters a new phase of implementing and enhancing EQF/NQFs,
upskilling pathways could be an opportunity to link more adult education qualifications to NQFs & EQF.

It was also suggested by the EQF-AG members that more background information should be gathered by each country before discussing further at the EQF-AG.

4. Synergies between VNFIL and UP at national and European level

This section reflects on possible synergies between VNFIL and UP putting forward some questions that may help Member States in gathering information at national level.

Skills audits

The VNFIL recommendation promotes the offer of a skills audit to people who are unemployed people or at risk of becoming unemployed. Unemployed people are a possible target group for UPs.

Questions:

– How is progress in delivering skills audits? For those people who prove to have basic skills deficits, what are the possibilities of offering them a tailored learning pathway to fill the gaps?
– Is there scope to extend the offer of skills audits to other groups, e.g. low-skilled employed adults?

Support to individuals:

The Recommendation on VNFIL promotes practices that support the individual: motivation to engage in the process, information, advice and guidance, assessment methods. The Upskilling Pathways Recommendation promotes outreach, guidance and support measures focussed on reaching individuals.

Questions:

– Are there developments in these areas that are transferrable to supporting low-skilled adults into and through the learning process?
– Have tools for identification, documentation and assessment of individual skills and competences been developed that have a particular suitability for the UPs target groups?
– Are the assessment methods used for VNFIL suitable for wider use in the context of learning provision for low-skilled adults?

Role of stakeholders:

Recommendation on VNFIL underlines the involvement and coordination of relevant stakeholders, as well as their rights, obligations and competences. Equally, implementing UPs should coordinate and build on what stakeholders are already doing and providing.

– Has stakeholder cooperation been established for the purpose of developing validation procedures, and could these partnerships be developed to incorporate responsibilities for UPs?
– Respecting the need for transparent quality assurance and competent staff, how feasible would it be to train personnel in adult education and training providers and related bodies to carry out assessment, guidance and accompanying tasks?

5. Activities envisaged by the Commission

– Existing synergies between VNFIL and UP should be addressed in the 2018 update of the European Inventory on validation;
• The Commission is currently carrying out a study to get a deeper understanding of the nature of skills audits and the extent of their use in Europe. The results will be available early in 2018.

• The Commission wishes to step up dialogue on synergies by organising a specific PLA on this in 2018.

• Using funds from the EaSI programme the Commission will arrangements to support mutual learning for teams of stakeholders who will be instrumental for implementing Upskilling Pathways. Each team could have a validation specialist.

• The National Coordinators for Adult Learning receive grants to pursue coordination at national and regional level, in particular to increasing adult participation in learning and to improve basic skills. Seminars, workshops and peer learning are all part of their activities. Information about relevant activities will be shared with EQF-AG members.

• Erasmus+ National Agencies will organise transnational contact activities (TCAs) taking strategic partnership projects on specific themes as their starting point. For example, the Finnish NA will host a TCA on “Validation of non-formal and informal learning - opportunities for special target groups in AE/VET” on 28.11. – 1.12.2017, in Kuopio, Finland. It will tackle how adult education can better integrate validation in their core activities, which tools are available for validation, how the key stakeholders essential to validation are addressed, how are high-quality validation procedures provided and how can the individual be in the focus?

EQF AG members are invited to:
- discuss the note and the proposed approach to address synergies between VNFIL and UPs at national level
- address the questions on skills audits, the role stakeholders and the support to individuals raised in section 4