

## EMPOWERING & MOTIVATING

EQUAL validates non-formal and informal workplace learning.

### UNRECOGNISED SKILLS OFFER UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

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Informal and non-formal learning are widely underestimated, or lack recognition, in contrast to formal training. When employees and employers are unaware of employees' informal skills, both employees and businesses remain underdeveloped:

- Employees with low self-esteem, particularly low-skilled employees, underestimate the skills they have. This dis-empowers them and leads to low career aspirations. They become reluctant to access training, thinking they are 'too stupid to learn'. Consequently they stay low-skilled and risk exclusion and marginalisation in the labour market.
- Employers also tend to be unaware of the tacit skills of their employees. This leads to less rational and cost-effective decisions on training and development of the human capital and the company. The workforce and the company become less competitive and this impacts negatively on the economy.

### VALIDATION CONTRIBUTES TO A MORE MOBILE AND ADAPTABLE WORKFORCE

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Validation of existing skills including non-formal and workplace learning is widely supported in European policy and practice because it brings tangible benefits to employees, employers, social partners, the economy and Europe as a whole. Validation of existing skills is also part of the strategy to prevent discrimination and social exclusion of disadvantaged people who are least likely to access training.

The Copenhagen Declaration (November 2002) established the aim of developing a set of common principles at European level for validation of non-formal and informal learning to ensure greater compatibility between approaches in different countries and at different levels, thereby adding value to work at local, regional and national level. Such common principles were adopted in May 2004 setting out the individual's entitlements, obligations of stakeholders and general for validation systems.<sup>[1]</sup>

Validation of existing skills is recognised in the European policy framework as a good tool to help all individuals become equipped with the skills required for a modern workforce in a knowledge-based society, permit their career development and reduce skills mismatch and labour shortages and bottlenecks.<sup>[2]</sup> In the Joint Employment Report 2003/2004 validation is seen as a tool to empower disadvantaged groups and promote integration into the society. The same message is found in the Employment Taskforce report.<sup>[3]</sup>

Previous work on validation has been made within the Leonardo da Vinci programme<sup>[4]</sup> and the Commission has made further contributions to the long-term development of high-quality, cost-efficient approaches to validation. Common validation of skills also helps encourage occupational and geographical mobility in the EU.

Most Member States either have, or are currently developing, methodologies for the validation of existing skills. Changes are already taking place to make education and training systems more open and flexible for individuals (e.g. more work-related training, 'bite size' learning, combined academic and vocational qualifications). High quality validation both facilitates mobility for the individual and makes it easier to improve policies on a national and/or transnational level.

In order to establish a Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences, the Commission is promoting a personal coordinated portfolio of documents - the "Europass" - which citizens, if they so choose, will be able to present throughout Europe as a means of communicating their competences and qualifications.

## PRACTICAL BENEFITS FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

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### Validation pays!

Successful validation focuses on the actual skills people have, engaging them in the validation process and linking outcomes to formal education. EQUAL shows how investment of effort and resources in validation of non-formal and informal learning pays off for everyone concerned:

- The focus on existing skills and their validation *empowers individuals*. With self-assessment and awareness of what they already know, EQUAL has successfully demonstrated that disadvantaged people can get advice and draw up a personalised training and development plan and top up their qualifications. After gaining qualifications through validation many individuals involved in such schemes expressed a wish to go on to gain higher qualifications<sup>[5]</sup>.
- In several EU countries, validation has also been successfully targeted to empower particular groups of disadvantaged people by addressing the needs and circumstances of: the unemployed and older workers<sup>[6]</sup>, migrants<sup>[7]</sup>, long-term unemployed; refugees<sup>[8]</sup>, and prisoners<sup>[9]</sup>.
- Employers become aware of what competences their employees and potential employees possess, or not, and can make adequate investment in their human capital and have a better return of their investment. Savings on training are considerable because individuals only learn what they need for their job and take off less time from work and private life for training.
- Education institutions find themselves more in demand as people empowered by validation (possibly including certificates and diplomas) seek more learning<sup>[10]</sup>.
- In several Member States, social partners, employer representatives and trade unions, have learned how to use validation as a tool to communicate the needs of employers and employees to education institutions and make the training provision more demand-driven.
- In Sweden<sup>[11]</sup>, EQUAL proved that validation<sup>[12]</sup> of skills makes it easier for people to enter and/or remain in the labour market and their skills can be used and developed to a higher degree than was possible before.. This all benefits the *economy* as well as the individual and employers.

EQUAL work has shown that 90 percent of people underestimate their own competences upon initial assessment. Validation is therefore extremely important as an empowerment tool.

### Validation tools in practice

Self-assessment of skills can be made *online*. EQUAL can prove that distance validation is cost-effective in reaching a number of smaller companies as it overcomes time and resource constraints<sup>[13]</sup>. Furthermore, EQUAL partnerships in the Netherlands<sup>[14]</sup> have shown that self-assessment can lead to a *portfolio of evidence* with certificates of formal and non-formal learning and this can be matched to job opportunities in the area. There is also evidence that a digital type of portfolio<sup>[15]</sup> has been very sought after by employers.

EQUAL has also successfully tested further validation tools:

- A *competence passport*<sup>[16]</sup> which can be used to record the individual's ideas of what skills they would like to develop and a logbook that serves to register daily activities to develop personal portfolios.
- a competency workshop<sup>[17]</sup> where job seekers or care professionals discuss their roles in a way that makes them realise what skills they have really got and aware of the skills needed, which helped them to plan better what steps to take towards the labour market.

### Partnership, sectoral and transnational approaches that work

EQUAL has demonstrated that the time and effort put into *raising awareness and getting the commitment of all stakeholders* is well worth the investment. Support from line managers and senior management is important for an integrated approach. When all stakeholders design a validation system together<sup>[18]</sup>, it reflects the needs and aspirations of them all: employees, employers, employee and employer organisations, social partners and representatives of education institutions. The experience of EQUAL in several Member States has shown that there

can be substantial challenges in bringing together stakeholders with very different institutional cultures and interests to create instruments and methodologies for validation. In order to overcome these barriers, EQUAL in Italy<sup>[19]</sup> for example has illustrated how starting working from the existing practices of validation among social partners avoids unnecessary conflicts and work.

Under EQUAL, both industry standards and formal education systems have been used as *reference points* in validating people's skills. It has been demonstrated that the first approach of recognising skills in fact gives access to accreditation in a certain industry. The complementary approach, linking validation to formal education, proved that individuals that got a portable validation could use it to enter further training<sup>[20]</sup> within the formal education system.

Employers need validation that reflects specific skills in specific jobs. Therefore EQUAL in Greece has piloted a *sectoral approach* to validation provides just that. It also ensures that the validation process is flexible<sup>[21]</sup> and can quickly be adapted to changing requirements. Another proven benefit is that once the system is in place, it helps to recognise evolving and new competences and the skills of individuals<sup>[22]</sup>. In several EU countries, EQUAL has developed and tested systems of validation for a very broad range of vocations:

- photography, car mechanics and electricians<sup>[23]</sup>,
- call centre workers and teleworkers<sup>[24]</sup>,
- farmers<sup>[25]</sup>,
- shipyard workers<sup>[26]</sup>,
- care workers<sup>[27]</sup>,
- workers in the fishing industry<sup>[28]</sup>, hotel and catering industry<sup>[29]</sup>.

*Transnational work* with partners from other European countries has added real value to the validation work under EQUAL. It has enabled partnerships to develop validation solutions<sup>[30]</sup> informed by experience and expertise developed in other European countries and contexts. An added value of transnational learning is that the elements that contribute to a validation system's success become much clearer. This could be clearly shown for a validation system based on a combination of work based on learning, transferring work culture and tacit skills, and normal vocational training that resulted in 80% of the participants getting a job.

Transnational work also makes it possible to avoid 'reinventing the wheel'<sup>[31]</sup> and gives transnational validation solutions - something that appeals to policy makers and makes them more willing to take them on in national systems and laws. The EQUAL solutions have already influenced policy makers in the Netherlands<sup>[32]</sup>, where there are few, and in Greece<sup>[33]</sup>, where there are no national laws on validation of skills as yet.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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EQUAL has achieved successes with validation of non-formal and workplace learning due to its distinctive features such as focus on disadvantaged groups, strong partnership approach and learning from transnational partners. Validation is a powerful tool to harness existing skills and competences of individuals, contributing to their personal development, improvement of human capital in firms, and making people more employable in the labour market. Recommendations from EQUAL include:

- **The Commission and Member States** should apply the experiences of EQUAL to the new Leonardo da Vinci projects to ensure complementarity.
- **Member States** should use the experiences of EQUAL, adopt and develop EQUAL solutions and incorporate them in national legal frameworks for validation and thus support people in achieving their full potential at work. Governments should also apply informal validation practices as employers.
- **Employer organisations, trade unions, formal education institutions and individual employers** need to collaborate and build strong partnerships so that validation reflects the needs of all stakeholders.
- **Employers** should recognise the importance of valuable skills gained by their workers on the job by interacting with other stakeholders and applying what they learn about validation of non-formal and informal learning.

- Education providers need to 'open up', recognise the value of experience gained outside the formal learning environment and work closely with organisations responsible for validation.
- **Social Partners** need to use the results of the EQUAL experience:
  - in connection with the annual reports on implementation of the framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications adopted in February 2002 and evaluation of this framework planned for 2006.
  - to address the institutional framework of the Member States to facilitate implementation of validation systems.
  - by feeding them into the revision of the 2006 priorities of the UNICE/UEAPME Joint Framework on Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competences and Qualifications.

## ENDNOTES

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[1] Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, Brussels, 18 May 2004.

[2] Strengthening the implementation of the European Employment Strategy, Communication from the Commission, Brussels, 7 April 2004, COM (2004) 239 final.

[3] Jobs, jobs, jobs - Creating more employment in Europe, report of the Employment Taskforce chaired by Wim Kok, November 2003

[4] Transparency and validation of skills in Europe, The contribution of the Leonardo programme, March 2004, Bordeaux, France.

[5] **Empowerment Centre EVC** (NL-2001/EQE/0033) the Netherlands.

[6] **Développement et valorisation des métiers de la maîtrise du bien vieillir**, (FR-NAT-2001-10820) France.

[7] **CVO** (NL-2001/EQE/0027) The Netherlands - Further info on the EQUAL website ([database](#), the [summary](#) in [French](#) or [English](#) of DP visit December 2003)

[8] **Empowerment Centre EVC** (NL-2001/EQE/0033) The Netherlands

[9] The aim of **INSERT**, (Befr21) Belgium, is to requalify prisoners and help them to find a job after the detention. INSERT project organises trainings in the 17 French prisons of Belgium. The ambition is to fight against recidivism by giving prisoners new skills. The aim of the training programme is to enhance the reintegration of the specific target group within the social and professional life. The DP is carrying out the activities in accordance of the following methodology.

- The assessment of the competencies of (ex)-prisoners
- To train the trainers with respect to education given to prisoners. Meetings are organised to exchange experiences in this field and to detect good practices as how to train prisoners. A guide/ vademecum with practical information and recommendations will be developed to this end. For example, the fact that 60% of the prisoners are addicted to drugs, affects their participation in class.
- To raise awareness of employers. The partners FOREM (public employment service) have an important role as they make available the existing channels of the employment process. A network of representatives facilitates the change of mentality of employers (especially in the private and self-employed sector where the legislation is not so strict on hiring ex-prisoners).
- To facilitate the reintegration of ex-prisoners. The aim is to address the relevant institutions concerned with the reintegration of ex-prisoners into the society. Until now, these institutions are more focused on the victims and ex-prisoners are left on their own once they are liberated. The project's idea is to inform the prisoners of the existence of such institutions. A survey is organised to assess the scope of the problem and meetings are held every two months to exchange views on this issue and to come up with possible solutions.
- To involve ICT in the process. An Internet simulation has been developed so that prisoners can practise the use of ICT.

**[10] Empowerment Centre EVC (NL-2001/EQE/0033)** The Netherlands. The DP promotes the possibility of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). The mission of the Knowledge centre APL is to make APL accessible for professional groups on meso-level through trade organisations and social partners. The unemployed, returners, refugees and partially disabled are therefore unable to profit from the possibilities of APL. This partnership develops methods and techniques of APL for the target groups and provides accessibility on a regional level. The EC-EVC partnership undertakes the following activities:

- To provide accessibility, tuning, validation and standardisation of the formal recognition of the informally learned knowledge;
- To develop expertise and knowledge;
- to realise the exchange of knowledge and expertise with regard to EVC for the target groups;
- to monitor the international compatibility;
- to promote the possibilities of APL.
- To inform organisation of their work and in order to foster the knowledge on APL and its possibilities.

**[11] Access (SE-42)** Sweden, develops a system for validation, quality management and control of courses carried out by NGOs in co-operation with working-life organisations within the informal educational system. The aim is to carry out research about the active working force within an educational programme performed by NGOs and the informal educational system. The partnership utilises alternative approaches to education with the scope of developing new models of learning and accreditation in order to help young people move into or towards employment. This is achieved through research, demonstration and pilot learning activities. The system is developed in a model with the co-operation of regional actors from working life, the informal and formal educational system within the Skellefteå region in North Sweden. The model facilitates and encourages a mutual learning process between actors and is tested also by actors in other parts of Sweden to secure its validation in different regional contexts.

**[12] Technomathia (GR-200859)** Greece. The main goal of this project is the development and implementation of a lifelong learning system and of a distance training and distance skills' accreditation in SME's. The DP is focusing on the dissemination and consolidation of life-long education and training in SMEs as well as on innovative application of new technologies in training and accreditation of vocational skills, especially IT and the Internet. The partnership also aims at supporting those threatened with labour market exclusion, by facilitating their professional insertion, by providing training and skills certification possibilities and by creating systems and support mechanisms both within and outside of companies. The DP's innovation is the integration and utilization of new technologies in Lifelong training, the promotion of employment, the creation of accreditation mechanisms of professional skills and the creation of informative results mechanisms.

The methodology developed by this DP is:

- Diagnosis and evaluation of the existing situation concerning the degree of introduction of lifelong learning mechanisms in SMEs and the existence of respective structures and services, which lay emphasis on the emergence of their functional capacities.
- Identification of necessary competences and educational needs of the selected target groups (industrial sectors) within SMEs. This to support the design of the distance-learning model. SMEs will be involved in this stage to test the "example job profiles".
- Model agreements preparation and support for the rotation of employed and unemployed persons between SMEs in training-employment.
- Preparation and implementation of training rotation programmes for unemployed and employed persons.
- Placement of unemployed persons in the labour market and monitoring.
- Design and development of appropriate counselling tools for the adoption of training mechanisms adapted to the needs of SMEs.
- Support of SMEs in the adoption of Lifelong Learning training mechanisms. This will be done through guidance and counselling by experts.
- Design and implementation of a system for distance accreditation of professional qualifications in SMEs
- Design and implementation of appropriate educational material for distance training

- Research of technologies and assessment of the needs for tele-training and a tele-accreditation system.
- Development and application of tools for distance training and accreditation in SMEs.
- Empowerment of SMEs' agencies for the establishment of structures for the promotion and application of tele-training and distance accreditation programmes.
- Implementation of tele-education programmes for SMEs' staff included in the project.
- Sensitisation and information campaigns for social partners.

Further information on the project are available on the [EQUAL database](#).

[13] "Implantation of flexible formulas of adaptability in small companies" **EqualCAN**, (ES-ES276) Spain.

[14] **Empowerment Centre EVC** (NL-2001/EQE/0033) The Netherlands.

[15] **Perspectief**, (EQI/0004) The Netherlands, **Equal AMA**, (EQI-0005), The Netherlands.

[16] **CVO** (NL-2001/EQE/0027) The Netherlands, is aimed at strengthening the positions of farmers. The DP aimed at making them aware of their skills and competences and at further improving their potential weaknesses. The aim is to secure the farmer in case of crises and to help them to become self-sufficient. The methodology used is to engage the farmers in life long learning in an individualised way (as every farmer focuses on specific priorities within the agriculture sector) and also to build their consciousness related to corporate social responsibility in order to make them responsible entrepreneurs together with the development of competences.

- The activities of the DP are to develop:
- 'Personal professional agricultural entrepreneurship'. Workshops on the ways to become successful are organised by the DP. These workshops were set up by the target groups themselves to increase their empowerment.
- 'Self-assessment'. Questionnaires and coaching assessing their strengths and weaknesses. Daily activities are registered in a logbook ('Portfolio of activities').
- After the self-assessment, a 'Competence and Development Plan' is developed, based on the "Competence Passport". The competence passport provides the farmer's personal opinion on further career development.

Further info on the EQUAL website ([database](#), the [summary](#) in [French](#) or [English](#) of DP visit December 2003)

[17] **Développement et valorisation des métiers de la maîtrise du bien vieillir**, (FR-NAT-2001-10820) France.

[18] **EQUAL-IRELAND**, (IE-12). See [www.dublinpact.ie](http://www.dublinpact.ie)

**EqualCAN**, (ES-ES276) Spain. In 2004 a National Catalogue of Professional Profiles has been drawn up, combining the contents of the "Catalogue of Certificates" and the "Professional Training Programmes". With this tool employers and employees are informed about the skills' catalogue set up in the autonomous Community of Cantabria. It also generates a culture of lifelong learning targeted at accreditation (validation), improving SMEs' competitiveness and the employees' professional careers development. This tool also enables the Regional Administration to provide training geared to professional skills and to give training aimed at accreditation, the detection of emerging occupations and/or new sources of employment.

[19] **Ductilis**, (IT-IT-G-PIE-016) Italy. The DP uses a methodology for assessment and certification of skills (agreed upon and recognised by all parties and usable for both training and jobs), which is experimented and standardised to increase permanence of workers with low-level qualifications and/or uncertain job contracts in the labour market. Ductilis' aim is to involve all social actors, which act in the labour market (work agencies, interim agencies, companies, trade unions, development agencies, vocational centres and schools, etc.).

[20] **Empowerment Centre EVC** (NL-2001/EQE/0033) The Netherlands.

[21] **New Employment Perspectives for Higher Quality Working Life** (GR-200836) Greece, The partnership promotes the adoption of an innovative model of flexible work organisation ("call centre work") in enterprises with call centres as well as the improvement of career prospects for call centre employees. It is targeted at heads of companies to promote the reorganization of work

in their businesses. Special methodologies for the consolidation of active participation and empowerment of the target groups (disabled people) are developed. Furthermore special preparation, training and support for unemployed disabled people, followed by their pilot placement in new jobs are provided by the DP. The main achievements of the DP are:

- Design of the national and European job profiles for call centre agents and supervisors. Training needs analysis of call centre agents and supervisors (completed).
- Design, organisation and implementation of flexible training course ("blended course type" -combination of classroom training, e-learning course and on the job training) for unemployed people with disabilities (completed).
- Individualised counselling and support of disabled people and future call centre agents (in progress).
- Pilot implementation of "call centre work" - 35 people are employed to work as call centre agents (20 trained people facing disabilities & 15 employees of the call centre).
- Design of an accreditation and certification structure for call centre agents (in progress).
- Design and implementation of adequate online tools (website, forum) regarding "tele-working" (in progress).

[22] **Access** (SE-42) Sweden.

[23] **Technomathia** (GR-200859) Greece. The project selected two branches (photographers, car mechanics and electricians) for the project's pilot application with the participation of employees' representatives, employers and self - employed persons in Small and Medium sized enterprises. The aims was:

- To record the educational needs in the selected branches (photographers, car mechanics and electricians) and to describe the profiles of these two specific professions
- To study and examine the necessary training specifications for the development of vocational training programs
- To prepare and support model agreements for the rotation of unemployed persons and employees between enterprises in training - employment, in the selected branches
- To design a model system for distance accreditation of professional qualifications
- To evaluate and select an appropriate model for distance training and accreditation by using modern technology within communication and information diffusion.

[24] **New Employment Perspectives for Higher Quality Working Life** (GR-200836) Greece.

[25] **CVO** (NL-2001/EQE/0027) The Netherlands

[26] **The route of professional shipyard worker**, (FI-22) Finland.

[27] **Développement et valorisation des métiers de la maîtrise du bien vieillir**, (FR-NAT-2001-10820) France.

[28] **ISTMO**, (PT-2001-020), Portugal

[29] **Equilibre** project, (FR-NAT-2001-10609); **Equality** (FR-NAT-2001-11006)

[30] **New Employment Perspectives for Higher Quality Working Life** (GR-200836) Greece. Design of an European accreditation system for call centre agents.

An important lesson that emerged so far is the effort made at transnational level for the design and application of an European accreditation system for call centre agents.

For further info, see the following website [www.ds-training.gr](http://www.ds-training.gr) (Delta singular educational services responds to the challenges posed by the Information Society and the New Economy by mean of : integrated solutions and innovative services in the field of vocational training, specialised programmes for human resources development), [www.deltasingular.gr/equal](http://www.deltasingular.gr/equal) (Protected), <http://www.employment-perspectives.gr/>, <http://www.oie.gr/equal/forum/>

[31] **Développement et valorisation des métiers de la maîtrise du bien vieillir**, (FR-NAT-2001-10820) France.

[32] **Empowerment Centre EVC** (NL-2001/EQE/0033), The Netherlands.

[33] **Technomathia** (GR-200859) Greece, **NEORION II** (GR-200776, Greece).