



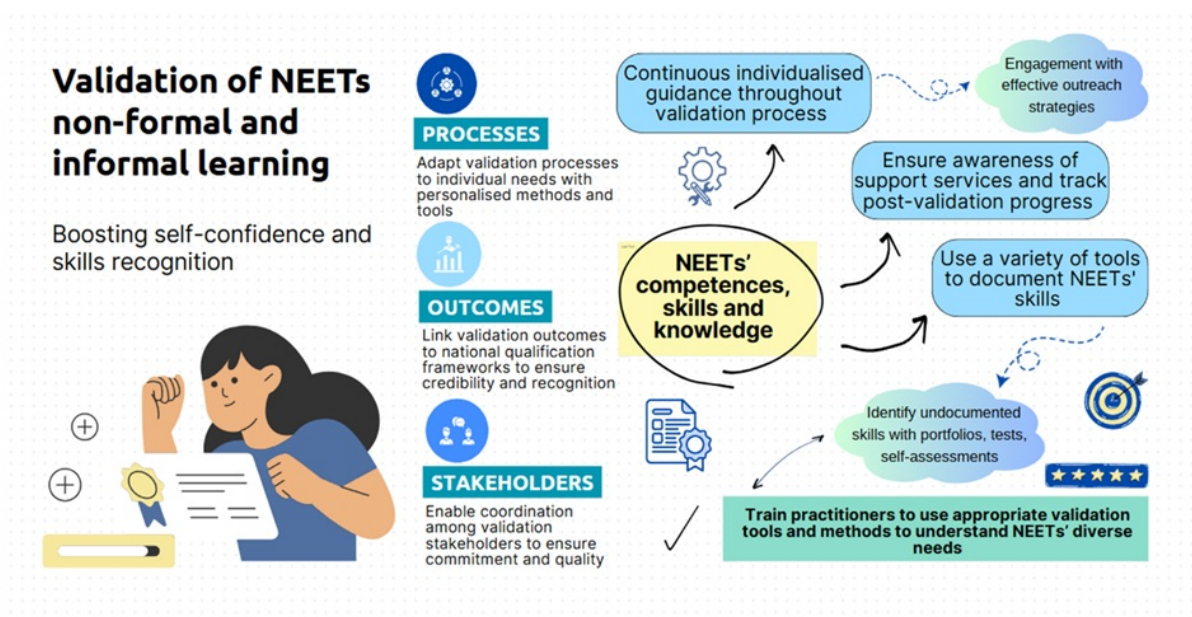
Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Problem statement

Most adult learning occurs outside formal education institutions. However, this learning often remains invisible as there is no certification linked to it. Many young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs) may have developed skills in different ways, such as through courses outside formal education institutions (non-formal learning), through self-directed learning in their free time, through voluntary activities or through work (commonly referred to as informal learning). As proof for skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal settings remains elusive, NEETs cannot use them to access education, training or job opportunities.

The lack of recognition and value of NEETs' skills and competences can result in low self-confidence and a sense of low self-worth, which may lead to disengagement from learning and society in general. Through validation, NEETs can have their knowledge and skills acquired outside formal institutions recognised and made visible, providing them with a valuable tool for engaging in and accessing education and employment.

In addition, NEETs' competences and skills acquired outside formal education may be very valuable in a context of tight labour markets. Validating NEETs' competences can not only support their activation and participation in the labour market and training but also give them access to work and learning opportunities.



Beneficiaries

- NEETs in recent search
- NEETs in long-term search
- Unavailable due to family responsibilities
- Discouraged and disengaged young people

Addressing the problem

The following tips may be useful for policy makers and practitioners involved in the design and delivery of validation processes.

Tip 1: Offering different approaches to validation and raising awareness of its benefits

Validation is ‘a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard’ ([Council of the European Union, 2012](#)). It consists of four distinct phases: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. The different stages of a validation process allow NEETs to reflect on the competences they have gained through non-formal and informal learning and consider how they could use these in different ways for their future professional life.

Many validation processes focus on the identification and documentation of competences, skills and knowledge acquired in different settings, often through portfolio building. This involves recording and building evidence, usually with professional support, of learning gained through a range of different experiences. Such processes build individuals’ self-awareness and ability to identify their own skills and competences, which usually increases self-confidence and empowerment. Giving young people opportunities to identify and reflect on their learning experiences outside formal education has personal benefits. Most significantly, it boosts their self-confidence, which is the first step towards returning to formal learning, moving into employment or becoming aware of their own skills and capabilities.

Validation arrangements have different scopes, objectives and outcomes. Some go beyond identification and documentation to emphasise assessment and certification. They enable individuals to obtain a full or partial qualification and may give direct access to formal education and training systems. For example, some universities might grant academic credits based on skills developed through volunteering. This can be an important incentive to return to formal learning, move into employment or become aware of their own skills and capabilities.

Young people who are not in employment, education or training might have an opportunity to access formal education programmes based on assessment of their non-formal and informal learning. Competences acquired through experience, during free time, volunteering or work, might be used for this purpose and provide NEETs with a new path to education. Learning experience might also be used to obtain credits, award modules or parts of a qualification, reducing the amount of time an individual must attend a training programme. In some instances, it might be possible to award full qualifications based on validation of prior learning. In addition, through validation, it might be possible to tailor training paths, so that individuals only attend training courses related to competences they lack. In Italy for example, the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA) are responsible for validating skills under a national framework. They play a key

role in offering tailored educational pathways for adult learners, including NEETs. Since 2014, a total of 129 CPIA centres have been established across all regions to support the validation of prior skills (Cedefop, 2023). Validation can also result in specific certificates that can be used in the labour market to access particular occupations.

By acknowledging and certifying these diverse learning experiences, the gap between formal education and practical skills application can be bridged, offering NEETs a clearer pathway to professional opportunities. This approach can remove barriers for vulnerable groups, such as young people who may have left school early, those with diverse learning needs, or those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, by validating their experiences and helping them integrate into the workforce and society. This can promote greater engagement and inclusion.

Tip 2: Placing the individual at the centre of the validation process

When designing and implementing validation in different settings, it is important to put with the individual at the centre of all procedures and processes. The diverse needs of individuals require validation to be able to serve different purposes. While the set-up of the system is necessarily linked to and dependent on the political, institutional, financial, technical, and legal context, validation should always focus on meeting individual needs.

Validation that adapts to individual needs can empower individuals in their career choices and help them become co-owners of the process. Such adaptability makes the validation process personalised, taking into account the individual's needs. Practitioners can achieve this by adapting methods and tools at each validation stage and using the most appropriate assessment methods in each case.

Information, advice and guidance are essential to help young people understand what the different validation options involve. Some NEETs are more attracted to informal learning, while others may benefit from enrolling in education and training programmes that can lead to a formal qualification. Some may not need to enrol in learning or training activities but could obtain a formal qualification by taking a final qualification examination directly. This opportunity is relevant to NEETs who may have left school to take up employment and who have acquired skills in the workplace that could be recognised through a formal qualification.

Tip 3: Providing guidance to support NEETs throughout the validation process

Guidance plays a vital role in supporting NEETs throughout the validation process. Giving NEETs access to guidance before, during and after validation procedures can help them realise their potential. At first, guidance involves raising awareness of validation opportunities and providing information on learning and upskilling options. It then continues by supporting individuals to develop personal portfolios and career management skills, so they identify the skills and competences that can be validated. Managing expectations and setting clear goals are important

elements of this guidance process. In line with Tip 1, guidance activities should be adapted to the needs of the individual.

Formalising frameworks of collaboration between validation and guidance, with clear roles and responsibilities, will improve the process and allow for more efficient use of resources (see [Cedefop 2019](#)). In Croatia for example, the national Strategy for Lifelong Career Guidance and Career Development in Croatia for 2016–2020 positioned the validation of non-formal learning within the context of career guidance services. These services are provided by organisations such as the Croatian Employment Service and universities. Validation is also presented as a potential tool for supporting NEETs back into employment or training, and directly links validation with active labour market policies.

[Effective outreach strategies](#) can play a key role in identifying, engaging and supporting NEETs – especially those who are furthest from accessing opportunities for validation and public support services. Connecting to civil society organisation activities and linking validation to local guidance and support communities may help reach those who are hard to engage.

Tip 4: Selecting the right validation tools and methods

Validation offers opportunities for self-exploration and reflection, which can be highly beneficial for NEETs working towards a formal learning outcome, such as a qualification. Practitioners can use a variety of tools and methods. For some young people, conversations or observations may be most suitable, while tests or examinations may be more appropriate for others. Based on the individual's profile, practitioners select the most suitable tools to document and present evidence, e.g. portfolios, third-party reports or CVs. Building a portfolio can help young people understand their own skills and competences by identifying undocumented skills. It gives them comprehensive insights into their learning achievements and experiences.

It is important to select assessment methods that best suit the individual's characteristics. Options include practical tests, interviews or counselling sessions, competence portfolios or online self-assessment tools. Some NEETs may worry about taking traditional tests, so alternative or combined assessment methods are more likely to be successful. These can be very effective in identifying and assessing the individual's knowledge, skills and competences, as well as their personal interests and motivations.

Selecting the right methods means that validation methodologies must balance validity, reliability and scalability while remaining objective. Practitioners should also consider proportionality, time and cost, both for the candidates and validation providers. Every validation approach developed and implemented will need to find a balance across these elements.

Tip 5: Monitoring NEETs after validation

Systematic data collection and monitoring arrangements (e.g. unique reference

numbers, registers) can be used to track the progress and mobility of individuals after they have completed a validation process. This helps to determine whether NEETs have successfully transitioned into education or the labour market, or if they need additional follow-up support. The [2023 validation inventory](#) shows that most countries lack data and monitoring infrastructure for validation practices. In most cases, there is no information, and where there is, it tends to collect only the number of participants, with limited follow-up.

ICT systems may help establish database repositories of knowledge and competences achieved, as well as track the validation process undertaken by NEETs (or other users). Creating centralised registries that gather all learning achievements of an individual in a structured way, ready to be shared with companies or education and training institutions, has significant potential.

Such systems, based on digital certification (e.g. [European Learning Model](#)) would facilitate the portability and use of skills for NEETs in different contexts. Digital credentials can hold detailed and exhaustive information, making certificates more transparent, more comprehensive, more widely accepted and easier to trust. Artificial intelligence could also help match an individual's skills profile more effectively with learning, work or volunteering opportunities.

Tip 6: Establishing links to national qualifications frameworks

The credibility of validation processes and their outcomes depends on whether employers and education providers consider the related qualifications to hold equal value to those acquired through formal learning. Validation requires qualifications and learning programmes to be described in terms of learning outcomes, focusing on what an individual knows, can do and understands after a sequence of learning.

Any validation process needs a reference point. This might be official and formalised or informal. Some scepticism towards validation stems from the unclear role played by reference points in the process. A lack of visible standards, unclear application of standards, or insufficient involvement of stakeholders in defining those standards can undermine trust in validation. Similarly, if standards used for validation differ from those in formal education, the outcome of the validation process (the certificate obtained through validation) can be seen as having a different value from that of a regular training process. This can confirm the perception that learning outside classrooms is less valid, weakening the value of validation outcomes, as certificates obtained through validation do not have parity of esteem with those obtained through a training programme.

Reference points matter to each individual candidate and directly influence what is considered relevant learning experience and outcomes, thus deciding what is valued through the validation process. At each stage, from early identification to final certification, individuals must be aware of this reference point or standard.

Linking validation to national qualifications systems and frameworks helps in make validation an accepted and normal route to qualification. This facilitates the recognition and portability of credentials. Such an approach also supports the quality assurance of validation outcomes.

Tip 7: Enabling coordination among validation

stakeholders to promote buy-in

As validation takes place in different settings and involves a wide range of institutions, including formal education providers, employers, trade unions and civil society organisations, it is essential that different actors contribute to the development, design and implementation of validation. Communication and coordination between the organisations involved in career guidance and validation ensure that individuals receive the right information and advice on validation procedures. This involves networking within and across sectors where validation is available: education and training, labour market services, enterprises, the voluntary sector.

A common vision of the role of validation in education and training, as well as clear agreement on the roles and contributions of different stakeholders, is essential. Validation should work with other services such as guidance, financing, and public employment services to reach its full potential.

Frameworks can improve coordination and coherence across contexts by institutionalising agreed principles and ways of providing feedback and information. These frameworks can have different levels of formalisation. In some countries, validation is supported by legislation, while in others, networks are created to build partnerships and collaboration. Common guidelines, ideally developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, might provide similar functions as institutionalised frameworks, although they tend to be less prescriptive. Potential users and individuals should have a voice in designing and contributing to validation.

Early involvement and contribution of different stakeholders to the validation process can ensure their commitment and the quality and coherence of the validation experience for the individual. Coordination between different stakeholders can also raise NEETs' awareness of validation opportunities and trust in their outcomes.

Tip 8: Training practitioners involved in validation processes

A wide range of practitioners may be involved in a validation process (e.g. career counsellor, career advisor, guidance counsellor, mentor, teaching staff). Validation practitioners will rarely work exclusively on validation; in most cases, they will combine validation duties with other functions, for example in guidance, teaching and training or work-management.

Trust in validation depends greatly on the front-line practitioners and professionals who work directly with candidates. These practitioners cover all aspects of validation and include those who offer information, provide guidance, carry out assessment, and manage assessment centres and procedures. Different profiles require different competences and skills. When working with NEETs, understanding their situation, characteristics and profiles is important to provide effective validation opportunities.

Ideally, practitioners should have access to appropriate training, where they can use practical guidelines and a range of different validation tools and methods in their work.

This ensures that all practitioners are suitably qualified to work with NEETs, to appraise the breadth and depth of their learning experiences, and to select the methods best suited to individual profiles. Training should also cover the development of soft skills, such as intercultural capacity, to meet the diverse needs of NEETs and to recognise the different life circumstances and backgrounds of these young people.

Related risk factors



Low education level



Migratory background

Related resources

Good practices

 Good practice

Integrated Network for Young People in the Province of Vicenza

Rete Integrata per i Giovani del Vicentino

In Italy, one of the main difficulties of the Youth Guarantee Programme in the course of the first phase was to reach and engage the most discouraged NEETs from social backgrounds characterised by high levels of poverty that affected their ability to enter and remain within training and education courses, to gain work experience and to find out about the possibilities offered

 Good practice

Transnational Employment YOUTHShare Centre- Greek Branch

Διακρατικό Κέντρο Απασχόλησης YOUTHShare, Ελληνικό Παράρτημα

The Transnational Employment Branch of YOUTHShare in Greece adopts, adapts and elaborates on the new practices for work inclusion based on Ripples in the Water Methodology from Norway -NHO- Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises). Based on this methodology, the YOUTHShare employment Centre and its staff aims through a person-centred and

by the Programme.

 **Germany**  **Italy**  **Portugal**

 **Spain**  **United Kingdom**

empower-focused approach at matching effectively the jobseeker with a potential employer.

 **Cyprus**  **Greece**  **Italy**

 **Spain**

 **Good practice**

DARE

Day One Alliance for Employment

The DARE (Day One Alliance for Employment) project is a dynamic and innovative initiative that supports young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET). By focusing on both skill development and social integration, DARE enhances the employability of marginalised youth across Europe.

 **Austria**  **Cyprus**  **Greece**

 **Italy**  **Lithuania**  **Poland**

 **Portugal**

 **Good practice**

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 **Cyprus**  **Greece**  **Italy**

 **Spain**

 **Good practice**

INTERCEPT (motivating mobiliziNg supportiNg nEets gReen CarEer PaThway)

Connecting young NEETs with job opportunities in the green sector

INTERCEPT empowered NEETs (individuals not in employment, education, or training) aged 25-29 by offering tailored training and paid work placements with green companies, assisting them in re-entering the labour

 **Good practice**

Lisbon City of Learning (LCL)

Lisboa Cidade da Aprendizagem (LCA)

A platform that includes all available learning opportunities within Lisbon, providing participants with access to a comprehensive range of educational experiences. Each opportunity is linked to corresponding microcredentials, which are awarded upon completion. Participants can store and manage these microcredentials in a badge

market. Through research and a pilot programme in Italy, Malta, and Lithuania, the project provides with valuable insights to shape future EU policy on youth employment in the green sector.

 **Italy**  **Lithuania**  **Luxembourg**

 **Malta**  **Poland**  **Slovakia**

wallet, showcasing their achievements and skills.

 **Portugal**

Publications

 Publications

Eurofound on NEETs

Eurofound's thematic area on NEETs

The website summarizes Eurofound's extensive research on NEETs

 **EU level**

 Publications

Cedefop: European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning are written for individuals and institutions responsible for the initiation, development, implementation and operation of validation arrangements.

 **EU level**

 Publications

Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage

Volume II: evaluating policy impact

This Cedefop study focuses on the contribution that vocational education and training (VET) can make to reducing early leaving from education and training (ELET).

 **EU level**

 Publications

Education and Training Monitor 2025

Report highlighting progress towards EU-level targets

The 2025 [Education and Training Monitor](#) follows the direction set out by the Union of Skills, the European Commission's overarching strategy for competitive and prosperous education and training systems.

 **EU level**

