Strong commitment for validation in Oslo
Report from the AVA expert seminar

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A silent white coat of snow fell on Oslo as almost 50 adult education professionals from all over Europe met at the AVA expert seminar on validation at the beginning of February. The goal: an action-plan to make validation of non-formal education a reality.

The meeting room was a beehive of activity for two full days as the many aspects, opportunities and challenges of validation was discussed and dissected. There is, currently, a sense of urgency around this topic - perhaps more so than in the last 20 years. Why?
Well, let us look at who is participating in non-formal adult education in Europe today.

The European commission refers to the average participant in adult education in Europe as a young (under 34) employed woman from Northern Europe. She is highly educated and takes part in short, non-formal work-related and often company-financed education. (Find more information about the survey on this link from the European Commission).
At the same time, there are 70 million low skilled adults in Europe. One of five adults in the EU lack literacy and numeracy skills. It is 2,5 times more likely that people with high level of literacy will participate in learning. The skills divide is real, and it is here. The increase in refugees to the European Union during 2015 has also increased the need for reform and development of education systems. The EU has taken these challenges to social cohesion seriously.
One response came in 2011 with the renewal of the European Agenda for Adult Learning. The goals in this Agenda are ambitious:

- making Lifelong Learning and mobility a reality,
- improving quality and efficiency,
- promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- enhancing creativity and innovation.

What does that mean for validation? The AVA project (Action Plan for Validation) is an Erasmus + project looking at exactly that.

Thus, there are several levels of expectation for what adult education can and should do in the current situation. Gina Ebner, secretary general of the European Association for the Education of Adults opened the AVA expert seminar in Oslo on February 1–2 by providing a snapshot of recent developments and challenges. By setting the scene she instilled a sense of urgency and she put validation into a larger context. In many ways we are living in a chaotic time. A clear and coherent action plan will help focus the work ahead, and it will guide the direction Europe should take.

The action plan will be launched and presented to European and national stakeholders in Brussels on the 29th of June 2016. This plan will address validation providers, the non-formal adult education sector, the business sector, national, regional and local governments as well as social partners.

– Now, with the refugee flow in Europe and the issue of radicalisation, learning is needed even more for democracy. Effective, permeable and inclusive validation systems will certainly contribute to increasing the participation in adult learning. Gina Ebner said in her opening speech.

An ambitious event

The Expert Seminar in Oslo was used to fine-tune the outline of the Action Plan, to discuss the various suggestions that could be included, and to connect it to the research conducted by the AVA-project. The event was organised by NVL and EAEA, but its success was thanks to the outstanding commitment of the AVA consortium and the great engagement of the whole seminar audience.

The goals of the conference were to:

1. Exchange experiences on validation focusing on the learning outcomes from the non-formal adult education sector.
2. Contribute to the Action Plan and its recommendations drafted within the AVA project and focusing on two main priorities:

   a. access of disadvantaged people to validation, and consequently further learning and/or the labour market;
   b. the permeability of non- and informal learning with the formal education system.

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Checking the figures

When policy is developed it sometimes happens that recommendations are built on vested interests and lack solid research evidence to support its foundation. The AVA project initiated research to gauge the state of validation within non formal adult learning in Europe today. Two researchers, **Bodil Husted** and **Kirsten Aagaard** from the NVL Expert Network on validation, have carried out a survey. The results and recommendations served as a basis for the discussions during the seminar. A special focus was put on methodologies and innovative approaches to make validation systems more inclusive and allow disadvantaged groups to move vertically and horizontally in their personal and professional lives. The horizontal analysis of the survey shows that respondents wish to cooperate more with other institutions both from the non-formal and formal sector in their countries. The survey also shows that there is a lack of inclusion strategies for disadvantaged groups into the validation process. This is true not only at the national level, but also at the providers' level.

In many policy papers the term "low skilled adults" is used to describe a specific segment of the population. During the seminar the term came under heavy fire as it tends to contradict the main philosophy of validation based on the notion that validation should help the individual to find out and document the skills she / he has. Participants agreed that the deficit-based approach should finally be abandoned in favour of an empowering one and suggested that more resources should be dedicated to the training of assessors in that sense.

The dilemma of validation

There is an increasing awareness about the importance of making the learning outcomes from all types of learning visible. Competences obtained through participating in non-formal education do get validated more often in Europe. Non-formal education is often organized as planned activities with a set goals and a specific time frame. In Sweden "Folkbildning" traditionally focuses on the learning outcomes as the right of the individual, and is concerned about what learning means for the individual. There are no grades or a diploma at the end of the course/training/study circle, and people participate voluntarily, out of their own wish for engagement and interest. Many skills and competences gained through participating in non-formal education can be validated, for example by using the new European qualification framework. But there is a dilemma; if the validation perspective becomes dominating it might undermine the genuine engagement, the sense of freedom and voluntariness and the critical potential of Folkbildning. For a deeper analysis and

explanation of the challenges in validation non formal learning outcomes, see this NVL report about key-competences.

Validation in other parts of the world

To broaden the perspective further the conference invited **Christine Wihak**, PhD and Director at Thomson Rivers University in Canada as the first keynote speaker. Wihak explained that in the modern world it is really a challenge to sort out between the different kinds of learning. We live in a time, she said, when people can engage in a lot of informal learning from social media, MOOCs, gaming, Wikipedia and use the information on internet. The field is blurred, and the pace of the change has left us gasping for air.

In order to illustrate and better understand the validation of non-formal learning Wihak presented "the continuum of learning" using four different dimensions:
• **Process** – how the learning process is controlled, supported and assessed.
• **Location and setting** -whether the environment is designed for learning, production or some other purpose, like socializing at for example a pub.
• **Purpose** – whether the learning is a primary or secondary focus of activity and whether the focus is controlled by the learner or an external authority.
• **Content** – whether the learning outcomes are highly specified; abstract or practical.

As processes can sometimes be very abstract and hard to grasp Professor Wihak introduced us to Fred. Fred is in his early fifties and works as a network manager in a small business. He is afraid of becoming unemployed because he does not have any formal diploma. He contacts an education provider to validate his computer skills.
Wihak placed Fred in the continuum of learning and suggested that Fred probably studies at the library or in the living room with his family around him, and that his purpose is externally driven because he needs to validate his computer skills to stay on the working market.
– Are the assessments of his competences as rigorous as during college learning and do they mirror an academic credit? Many say yes, Christine Wihak said.

She presented a couple of global examples of validation from the Programme review done at the Thomson Rivers University in Canada. In America, the American Council on Education is a network of over 2 000 colleges and universities that offer credit towards formal credentials for programs reviewed by the council. Several business organisations are involved. The council checks that the learning outcomes are measurable and that they are comparable to learning outcomes of similar formal education courses in the subject or field. In the Republic

of Korea, learners can accumulate credits in *learning accounts* in order to earn higher education degrees. Korea also accredits traditional and cultural artistic activities.

Good examples of validation

Eight validation projects were then presented in a "gallery walk". The participants walked between stands where the project coordinators introduced their scope, working methods and results. All the projects are presented [here](#).
The gallery walk caused a great deal of discussion and the participants could write their questions on an on-line tool called Padlet. Below is a small selection of the questions[1].

Disadvantaged groups:
• Are there any experience that validation methods are more valid than school or classic VET?
• Which role do the European key competences in Lifelong learning play in validation?

Future of validation:
• What do we think will be the ideal situation in 2018?
• Do we need special measures for the refugees?

Outcome:
• What would be alternative outcomes for validation other than partial/full formal certificates and what benefit would they bring to the candidate?

Quality:
• Can we define the competences acquired in non-formal learning settings – and how to value them the right way?

Main challenges according to the stakeholders

The gallery walk was followed by a "fish bowl" debate, where a group of people discussed the main themes and the outcomes of the AVA survey and analysis and the issues brought up during the conference day. One of the important questions discussed was "How can people in a disadvantaged position be validated, and who should finance the validation?"

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[1] Read all of them here.

Cooperation between all stakeholders and lobbying to make everybody understand the value of validation are core suggestions.

Ingegerd Green from Skärteknikcentrum, an industry association in Sweden, said that there often is an absence of perspective from the working life when validation is being discussed. Skärteknikcentrum validate different industrial skills, and it leads to certificates.
– When you run a business, you want to make money. Your main question is to find staff that is competent enough to make your business become competitive. We need to understand each other's perspective, Green said.

Guidance counsellors have an important role, both for motivating people to start studying and to help them go through the entire validation process. "They are the glue between the people and opportunity", said Fjóla Lárusdóttir from Iceland.

With so many different needs and views someone called for a "Validation Fairy" to enter the stage. This was met with much enthusiasm, and her work was immediately set out.
– I wish she could make everyone understand the economic value of validation. Lack of money is one of the major problems for the non-formal adult education sector working on validation. Will you do it, fairy? Susana Oliviera from the Portuguese organisation Kerigma asked with a smile.

Everyone must be involved

The second day of the conference was opened by Astrid Krohn, EPALE coordinator from Norway. EPALE is an Electronic Platform For Adult Learning in Europe. Krohn presented EPALE as "the mother of all sites" on adult learning with the purpose to unite the whole field, to collect inspiration, guidelines, resources and research about adult learning. EPALE is a good tool for the AVA consortium and the seminar participants to keep the discussion about the Action plan for validation going on until the policy debate in Brussels and onwards. Krohn encouraged all conference participants to register on the site. Gina Ebner from EAEA added:
– It has been created for us, adult educators. If we do not use it, the Commission might question if it is worth investing in adult education!

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Work continued in open space workshops where the participants discussed four themes based on the model cases for validation created within the AVA survey:

1. Best practice – a model for a structured, coherent and well-developed validation activity in non-formal settings.
2. Validation as a 'project activity' – not anchored in national validation policy and validation practices.
3. Alternative routes in methods and approaches.
4. 'One step up' as the result of validation.

A number of issues were raised in the workshops and will be taken on board during the final stage of the AVA project. Here are some highlights from the workshops:

- Everyone - communities, municipalities, social partners, education sector, employers - should be involved in the validation process. But that is not all. The validated person's family must also be involved and understand the process.
- It is still important to discuss the goal of validation. Your focus will look very different depending on if you look at validation as a tool to get a job, a means to advance in one´s career or education, or a way to further personal development.
- In the informal and non-formal sector, empowerment is an important goal. It is also challenging. Measures are needed to help document empowerment.
- There is a general need to improve cooperation between stakeholders. One example: in Iceland, the education providers cooperate with trade unions and employer organisations.

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- To mainstream validation there is still a need to "sell it" to relevant parties. It is also necessary to canvas for increased funding streams.
- Using terms and phrases: in the AVA report, the term disadvantaged groups is used. The participants suggested to use, depending on the context: excluded groups, marginalised groups, low-qualified groups.
- Professionals will also need training. We need a "validation checklist" for teachers with no experience of non-formal education to make them more aware of non-formal skills.

A general comment was made during the conference that the top down and bottom up initiatives should complement each other. The top down approach insists that the stakeholders lobby for / pressure for the creation of appropriate legal frameworks. The bottom up approach should help create networks between stakeholders and validation practitioners in order to

1) talk together;
2) understand each other's language better;
3) work together for validation.

Organisations like NVL and EAEA, as well as the EPALE platform can help showcasing examples when networks succeed in influencing policy and / or develop good practice.

After two days of inspiring work the participants returned home with both new ideas and contacts. The commitment of the participants for further work on validation was evident.

Questions to participants

Deirdre Goggin, company advisor at Cork Institute of Technology, a higher education institution in the south of Ireland offering programmes in business, humanities, science, engineering, marine studies, music and art.

What is the biggest challenge for validation in your country?

– The biggest challenge for validation in Ireland is that our system is quite fragmented between all the stakeholders and the learner is in the centre of the system. The fragmentation means that different systems exist between and within sectors. There is no consistency of approach, which is difficult for a learner to navigate.

And the biggest challenge in your work?

– The biggest challenge in my work relates to managing expectations in my interactions with other stakeholders and learners. As the national framework of qualifications underpins my work in higher education, then I am bound to equity, fairness and quality assurance for all learners, those from traditional paths and also those with informal and non-formal learning. It can happen that a learner or cohort of learners do not have the necessary skills to enter higher education at a certain point. The challenge is how to manage this message, whilst also indicating a more appropriate route for them, which may not be the message they wanted to hear. This can also relate to work place learning.

Can you tell more about the Irish solutions?

– One Irish solution for this has been to develop a RPL practitioner network to get all stakeholders into one room to discuss the issues, challenges, solutions and processes, to try and work together to develop solutions that align with each other whilst also maintaining autonomy. The stakeholders represent the broad span of higher education, further education, private providers, social partners, industry representatives, professional bodies, guidance and policy makers/ influencers. In order for each stakeholder to implement processes they need to have ownership over what is implemented, so a central national standardised process is not foreseen in the near future. The practitioner network keeps the learner as the central focal point and is developing practice organically through peer learning activities, as organisations are at different stages of development. It is hoped that a national policy will develop to support this organic development of practice. This is certainly a first step, which hopefully will help in addressing the fragmentation of the system.

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Göran Hellmalm, quality manager/business analyst at <u>Studieförbunden</u>, the Swedish umbrella organisation for non-formal adult education.

Which are the biggest challenges for validation in your country?
– Financing and regulation. The cost for individuals has to be low and we need legislation of civil rights for the disadvantaged groups. Validation already exists for people with formal and higher education. A Syrian doctor will always succeed; it is more difficult for an illiterate person from Somalia.

– Until now, Sweden has been focusing on the formal education and we have been the last to join the formal qualification framework. It will be interesting to see how the formal and the non-formal systems develop in Sweden. We have a good organisation and infrastructure at Studieförbunden and we can work widely in Sweden. When we set the standard for general skills, we can produce a validation certificate with relevance on the labour market.

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Martin Noack, senior project manager at the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Germany, whose programs are designed to strengthen society and help individuals reach their full potential by developing the resources needed to achieve those goals.

What is the biggest challenge for validation in your country?

– The biggest challenge for validation in Germany is to develop and install procedures for the validation of informal (and non-formal) learning that work on a large scale and provide successful participants with valid formal certificates below the established educational degrees.

More information about the German project:

This is the link to our study (in German) with a direct link to the publication here. English version and direct link here.

Birgit Schmidtke, Austria, researcher at the Austrian Institute for Research on Vocational Training (öibf), a scientific, non-profit, independent research institute.

How do you work with validation?

– One of our research fields includes vocational guidance and counselling. In Austria independent guidance has an important role to support validation processes. In addition to accompanying guidance, low-threshold counselling for target groups can provide access to validation through information and orientation.

More information and links:

All information about the AVA seminar has been collected at the AVA page.

Videos about good examples on validation from different countries : http://bit.ly/AVA_videos

All tweets with the hashtag #actionforvalidation and other relevant information from the seminar can be found here: bit.ly/storifyAVA

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