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Stocktaking Report

Table of Contents

Preliminary Remark.....	2
1. Desk research on ECVET Implementation in the Partner Countries	3
1.1. Executive Summary	3
1.2. Findings from each country.....	4
1.2.1. Italy	4
1.2.2. Germany	4
1.2.3. Lithuania	5
1.2.4. Poland.....	5
1.2.5. Portugal	5
1.2.6. Bulgaria.....	5
1.2.7. Greece.....	6
1.2.8. Slovakia.....	6
1.2.9. Belgium	7
1.2.10. The Full Version of the Desk Research	8
2. European Pilot Projects and their Accordance to the ECVET Recommendations.....	8
2.1. Background.....	8
2.2. Minimum standards and joint agreements.....	8
2.3. ECVET projects analysed in IMPACT	9
2.4. Results	9
2.4.1. Content and Terminology.....	10
2.4.2. Qualification	10
2.4.3. Unit of Learning Outcomes.....	10
2.4.4. Learning outcomes	11
2.4.5. ECVET points.....	11
2.4.6. Model case pilot projects	12
2.4.7. The Full Version of the ECVET Pilot Project Report.....	12

3. Online Survey of Educational Professionals on VINFL and Learning Technologies.....	13
3.1. Intention and Structure	13
3.2. Results	14
3.2.1. Utilisation of web-based learning tools and instruments	14
3.2.2. Utilisation of OER.....	14
3.2.3. Areas of implementation.....	14
3.2.4. Validation of learning outcomes and connection to web-based learning	15
3.2.5. Developing an Open Learning and Validation Environment	15
3.2.1. The Full Version of the Online Report	16
4. Expert Interviews on VINFL	17
4.1. Executive Summary	17
4.2. Partner/National Summaries.....	18
4.2.1. Greece.....	18
4.2.2. Portugal	18
4.2.3. Italy	18
4.2.4. Bulgaria	19
4.2.5. Slovakia	20
4.2.6. Lithuania	20
4.2.7. Poland	21
4.2.8. Germany	21
4.2.9. The Full Version of the Interviews.....	22

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Preliminary Remark

The approach to introduce a system for the “Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning” by the European Union¹ is aiming at the creation of comparable and transparent qualifications in order to foster mobility and economic growth in Europe.

To achieve this, all legislative and relevant executive organs of the EU and the member states have started a process to implement validation instruments and systems such as the EQF, ECVET, EUROPASS, NQFs and others. In 2018 all member states should have been implemented concepts on VINFL.

The IMPACT project and the IMPACT report were designed and developed to contribute to the implementation of VINFL on the practical and operational level.

¹ presented by the Commission, the Council and the Parliament in its recommendations from 2002, 2009, 2012 and lately by the CEDEFOP recommendation 2016

It aimed:

- on the one hand at creating a substantial understanding on the level of knowledge of the VINFL concept and the related instruments in the member states
- on the other hand at the area of learning technologies or digital learning with the intention to explore the potentials and shortcomings of IT-aided VINFL

Eventually IMPACT should contribute to the creation of a rather holistic approach which couples informal learning with validation.

Based on the findings in the stocktaking, the IMPACT project set up:

- A prototype for ECVET-specifications (to facilitate the transfer of learning outcomes and other VINFL data from one platform to another and to achieve the full impact of European validation)
- An IT based validation environment
- An holistic open learning platform that connects Open Source Learning Technologies (mahara and moodle) with the validation software
- A continuing professional development programme for educational professionals
- A pilot programme for these stakeholders to implement validation in their educational practice

The report on hand compiles the four parts of the extensive stocktaking phase within the framework of the IMPACT project:

1. Desk research on the ECVET Implementation in the Partner Countries
2. Analysis of European ECVET Pilot Projects and their accordance to the ECVET Recommendations
3. A large scale online survey on the competences and needs of European educational professionals related to Validation, OER and Learning Technologies
4. Expert interviews in the nine partner countries related to the competences on VINFL and learning technologies.

The extended versions of each part can be retrieved from the IMPACT.my-vita.eu open learning space.

1. Desk research on ECVET Implementation in the Partner Countries

1.1. Executive Summary

Partners from DE, PL, GR, IT, LV, BE and BG analysed the state of introduction of validation in general and ECVET specifically in the professional field.

Main source of inquiry were the European information platform (ADAM) to identify the projects in the field. When searching for projects and products on the ADAM Portal there were 427 projects on ECVET topic. The ADAM Portal was a basis for this research, however information was taken also from websites like e.g. National Agency for LLP Programme, website of ECVET national teams in partner states or, on the European level the ECVET portals www.ecvet-info.de and www.ecvet-projets.eu.

In the desk research phase the partners analysed the visible projects with participation of their member states and presented three exemplary projects each.

Due to the sheer quantity of projects and also the dynamic development the summaries display a non-representative state of ECVET projects in Summer 2015.

However, in regard to the IMPACT objectives, the following general statements can be made:

- In all countries there is an increasing interest at national level regarding the theme of validation. (This is by the way also highlighted in the AE sector – in the latest EAEA country reports)
- As matter of fact the reported ECVET projects highlight a purely sectoral approach; an overarching, centrally managed ECVET approach is not yet existing in any of the countries covered by the desk research.
- Although ECVET sets up a “specification” which should lead to comparable learning outcome descriptions, most of the projects often do not keep to these specifications and develop their own systems.
- However, the selected projects have kept to the basic regulations in the specifications, for instance they tried to derive competence levels from EQF descriptions, described them in knowledge and skills (the competence column is rarely operated (as level of autonomy and responsibility)).
- ECVET points have been rarely assigned to the qualifications and CPD units and it seems that also the assignment to EQF / competence levels is quite an issue for most of the project consortia.
- IT tools have only been used in very exceptional cases, mostly the use is limited to asynchronous e-learning with no connection to validation. Singular validation instruments refer to self-assessment only.

1.2. Findings from each country

1.2.1. Italy

This research activity, focused on projects coordinated by Italian partners in the ECVET field, highlights an increasing interest at national level regarding the development of ECVET system. A relevant remark is that the projects analysed are mainly focused on a restricted set of professional profiles related to specific sectors such as agriculture, tourism, green energy and health. Regarding the use of IT tools we have to report that they do not play a key role, even when these tools could provide an added value to the improve the results of the projects.

Moreover, it is important to highlight the interest towards the validation of not formal and informal learning path (e.g. the CO.L.O.R project).

Finally, the Adam portal was the main source of information for this research, however the most recent projects have not been included yet and the information reported are not always updated or available in the project websites.

1.2.2. Germany

There is little information about the concrete assignment of ECVET credits to learning units. In the ECVET guidelines following information can be found:

- ECVET credits are to be assigned based on defined amounts of time (1 year formal full time VET = 60 ECVET credits as reference). Though many projects elaborated specific learning units, none were found that actually assigned ECVET credits to their units.
- Very different interpretation of the concept in each project, especially in regard to the competence dimensions, for example different understandings of what belongs to which dimension. Also, the concept of competence dimensions is used in various ways, referring to

none, only one or two...etc., often not applied in a systematic way or working with own definitions (e.g. easy metal)

1.2.3. Lithuania

There are number of projects in Lithuania linked with ECVET application. Generally there are only 14 (out of 74) vocational training institutions in Lithuania applying modular teaching which is the basis of ECVET application.

Several changes have been made to the legal framework in recent years in order to pave the way for the development of a national validation system.

The number of VET institutions applying modular teaching is increasing each year (there is legal basis on level of ministry). Anyway, ECVET is not a popular issue in vocational training yet. There are some examples of projects in the field of mechatronics, electrical engineering/electronics, educational sectors as well as with people with learning difficulties, with migration background, for drop-outs and people from sectors of society with low educational achievement. Application of ECVET, VET programmes modularisation and assessment of competencies were found in analysed projects. Anyway, there is no IT based system for implementation ECVET in Lithuania.

1.2.4. Poland

18 projects in ADAM were coordinated by Polish organisations (see annex 1).

Majority of the projects coordinated by Poland concerned ECVET in building and constructing, others in the banking or renewable energy sectors.

- When doing the research, we faced the problem of not valid information, not enough information, not updated websites, and of no availability of the projects portals.
- The research in Poland has proven, that there are currently many activities and projects in the ECVET field. On the other hand, there are still a lot of undeveloped professions and the awareness on this topic among teachers is still not even on satisfactory level.

1.2.5. Portugal

The desk research in Portugal showed that some projects include the ECVET reference, there is a national agency to implement the System, but not much examples were found when it comes to the real application of the system.

There is some experience in validation in the former New Opportunities Centers, now called Centres for Qualification and Vocational Education that adopted a national reference system and certificate the non-formal education in a formal frame, not with ECVET.

There are only small references to on line tools, essentially in academic documents. No mention was found to a Validation IT tool really used.

1.2.6. Bulgaria

The research in Bulgaria has shown clear signs, that there are currently dynamic developments in the ECVET field, but there are also still a lot of undeveloped professions and potential for more projects. There are already educational institutions that have implemented the system in their learning projects.

IT Tools already get implemented in the process of project implementation, but not in all projects.

A general important notice is that the web research for finding ECVET projects was not a very easy one – the websites of the projects are often not very Search-Engine-Optimised and maybe also not very well linked with other websites – more competent IT approach in this regard (better SEO, link with other projects, websites etc.) would increase the chance for a good practice to be discovered online and transferred in other countries/organisations.

The chosen good practice examples are not just because of their good ECVET based programme, but because their influence could have positive impact not just on national, but also on European level. These projects were developed and realized with the support of the European Union, which shows the strong engagement on EU Level with the successful implementation of this educational credit system.

1.2.7. Greece

The research in Greece has shown that although Law 3879/2010 on LLL and more recently Law 4186/2013 on the reform of secondary education and VET, envisage (but not essentially require) the establishment of ECVET. EOPPEP as a National Coordination Point for EQF has already established the NQF that is not however fully operable yet. A national committee of ECVET experts has been set up, but further implementation of the learning outcomes approach in VET structures has not been fully adopted. There are some steps in this direction through the establishment of a register of professional profiles describing a number of qualifications in IVET and CVET in terms of learning outcomes.

Several EU-funded projects relevant to ECVET have also been implemented. VET institutions that joined these programs became familiar with the approach as they piloted ECVET, but the system as a whole is far from being implemented at a national level. A small number of universities and vocational training structures that provide training programmes have emphasised the importance of ECVET for their programmes, but its implementation is not yet accomplished. **ECVET-based pilot programmes** that took place at a national level are not enough to suggest that this instrument has an overall acceptance in Greece.

From the existing experience, it is obvious that the added value of ECVET in Greece is connected to mobility, transparency of qualifications, VET reform, and changes in recognition and validation processes. We found projects aimed at applying the ECVET methodology for describing, assessing and validating learning outcomes in the VET study programmes of non-formal technical specializations such as Electricians, Plumbers, Automotive Mechanics, and professionals operating as safety trainers in the Construction sector. Some NGOs tried noticeable good practices in using IT tools for validation, running projects quite innovative referring to measuring and assessing soft skills trying to facilitate the social inclusion of disadvantaged people and enhance their employment perspectives. We found quite interesting programmes referring to incorporate technology in successful implementation of e-learning and training programmes referring to computer literacy. Also, in higher education some non-academic free-access programmes are currently in the process of reform with a view to the application of ECVET. In conclusion we could say that there are still practical and strategic barriers for adopting ECVET in Greece as citizens are not fully aware of this European strategy and its connection with the current economic situation; it is still difficult for providers to describe “learning outcomes” based on ECVET; there is a lack of consensus and of strong social agreements that essentially need to include social partners; transformation of qualifications and their fragmentation into knowledge, skills, abilities is not completed in every learning domain, whereas ensuring transparency in the certification and recognition of learning outcomes and ECVET market value are not documented.

1.2.8. Slovakia

Most of the projects (if not all) we found had a „transfer of innovation“ character and very often focus on mobility. In most cases already tested good practice examples were transferred and tailor made for target

groups in Slovakia. Application of ECVET and EQF in Slovakia is still difficult since formulation of qualification standards is not finalised. The projects therefore often use materials from abroad. However, it is good that there is a real effort to formulate competences and levels. In most projects there is a real effort to formulate competences and levels according to the EQF. Application of IT tools goes as far as „traditional“ e-learning or blended learning courses with various materials. We did not find projects that use IT tools for validation or any specific software for validation. Most projects do not address the issue of informal learning and none use IT tools for validation of competences gained in informal and non-formal learning.

It needs to be mentioned that to find out any information about ECVET projects implemented in Slovakia is rather difficult. Few comments on our experience from conducting this research are below.

Websites of projects mostly do not work, even if the website is found on the official ADAM database.

Contact persons mostly do not reply to emails, and if so, they are not very much willing to communicate and answer questions about the project even when email communication starts, the more questions are asked the less willingness there is to answer. We had one or two cases when actually anyone gave us any reply and provided some information.

1.2.9. Belgium

The research in Belgium has clearly shown that ECVET is being implemented at different levels. On the one hand the Ministry of Education of the French-speaking community has implemented a comprehensive VET-reform. Programmes and qualifications are organized in units and the principle of certification per unit is being adopted. The goal is to reward achievement and to reduce drop outs. This reform was done in the framework of the project *CPU* (Certification par unités).

On the other hand; EQF and ECVET are being introduced at sectorial level. A first set of examples we found are related to the tourism sector. The projects *Innoguide Tourism (2010-2013)* and *Innoguide 2.0 (2014-2016)*, are coordinated by the Flemish government organization for tourism VisitFlanders and ViaVia Tourism Academy is another Belgian partner in the project. The consortium offers trainings on interculturality, sustainability and experience based tours. In addition OER training materials are available. Thanks to the comparative study of tourist guide training programmes, the Innoguide training programmes have been benchmarked to the EQF and to the national qualification frameworks.

The project *Interpreting our European Heritage*, with partner Diesis Coop based in Brussels, focusses on the implementation of ECVET more explicitly: “The project ‘s main outcome is the creation of the transparency and the recognition of the learning outcomes characterizing the “heritage interpreter” professions, applying and implementing the European tools and frameworks EQF and ECVET, and the definition of two new professional profiles, “Interpretative host” and “Interpretative guide”²

The second sector in which we found a good example is the nuclear energy sector. Due to the transnational nature of nuclear energy; the sector has specific needs for international cooperation, mobility and training. Therefore, the sector has developed a roadmap for the implementation of NUVet (Nuclear VET). The Belgian Nuclear Research Centre SCK-CEN ([Dutch](#): *Studiecentrum voor Kernenergie*; [French](#): *Centre d'Étude de l'énergie Nucléaire*) is a world-wide renowned research centre developing peaceful applications of radioactivity for the medical world, industry and the energy sector. The SCK-CEN Academy is currently working on the introduction of the ECVET approaches in its training courses. Dedicated web-based portals sustaining interactive research communities are developed.

The sources used for this research were the ADAM database, the ECVET magazine and other websites related to projects and organizations.

² <http://www.interpretingeuropeanheritage.com/announcements/euconferenceonthe17thofseptemberbrussels>

1.2.10. The Full Version of the Desk Research

The full version of the first (desk research) part of the report consists of 60 pages containing in depth descriptions of available ECVET projects in the partner countries.

2. European Pilot Projects and their Accordance to the ECVET Recommendations

2.1. Background

The approach to introduce a system for the “Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning” by the European Union³ is aiming at the creation of comparable and transparent qualifications in order to foster mobility and economic growth in Europe.

To achieve this, all legislative and relevant executive organs of the EU and the member states have started a process to implement validation instruments and systems such as the EQF, ECVET, EUROPASS, NQFs and others.

Since 2007 more than 100 ECVET pilot projects were funded in the framework of the Lifelong Learning project and its follow-up programme ERASMUS+.

In order to achieve the aforementioned goals of transparency and comparability and to enable the member states and the professionals in the field to set up operational instruments and procedures, certain European minimum standards are required.

2.2. Minimum standards and joint agreements

On 20 December 2012, the Council of the European Union issued a “Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning” which was updated and substantiated in the CEDFOP recommendations in 2016. These recommendations related to the *validation procedure* of the four validation steps Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification.

The paper on hand related to a second “recommendation” from 2009 that described the *structural and content related criteria related to the implementation of ECVET*.

Both recommendations are cornerstones of the concept of VINFL because they form the conceptual, structural and procedural basis of the whole approach.

The report on hand has been compiled by a team of experts from educational science and practice in the framework of the IMPACT project. IMPACT has been aiming at the introduction of digital technologies to support the process of VINFL.

Due to the sheer quantity of data collected, analysed and administered validation is not imaginable without the use of information technologies.

However, also the feasibility to use information technologies to facilitate the validation of learning outcomes and the realisation of a joint European approach for the implementation of ECVET thoroughly depends on the common standards.

³ presented by the Commission, the Council and the Parliament in its recommendations from 2002, 2009, 2012 and lately by the CEDEFOP recommendation 2016

2.3. ECVET projects analysed in IMPACT

Therefore, the IMPACT report analysed 75 European ECVET projects that could be identified in the main European databases on ECVET projects and which referred to the recommendation of the European Parliament on ECVET (2009).

The IMPACT report made a profound analysis of the EU-funded ECVET projects and researched how the projects dealt with the challenges to set up ECVET related systems for qualification related to their professions, qualifications and continuing professional development offers.

IMPACT has been aiming to convert usable approaches into a first prototype approach for a comparable and transparent IT based system and to feed those ECVET projects into this system that stick to the official ECVET specifications.

This prototype was constructed in order to facilitate the transfer of:

- Qualifications (e.g. from one member state VET system to another)
- Units of learning outcomes (e.g. to re-use them while transferring them from one qualification to another (e.g. in case of similar units in different qualifications⁴)
- Learning outcome descriptions (from similar units to others)

The prototype was also established to design the conceptual basis for a multilingual transfer of the relevant descriptors as well as for an efficient IT-supported management of users (learners, authors, assessors), qualifications and validation services (to support validation structures that should be set up in the member states).

2.4. Results

The report showed that approximately 50% of the 75 researched projects could be taken into further analysis since they met the minimum requirements related to the main standards.

From these 33 projects a group of 10 projects was selected to be implanted in the prototype after a profound analysis, using the official specifications as quality criteria. The selected projects were introduced in a software prototype to process their data in accordance to ECVET, EQF and other relevant official European validation requirements.

The funded ECVET projects covered a period from 2008 to 2015. They can be seen as pathfinder projects that explored the general feasibility of the ECVET approach in general and some of its components.

Against this background one can explain the high percentage of projects that did not keep to the recommendations.

However, to gain the full benefit of the whole VINFL concept the authors like to emphasise that after this pathfinder phase international projects that seek for comparable qualifications have to respect minimum criteria and stick to a joint structure that corresponds with the qualification frameworks and the ECVET related recommendations.

The ongoing discussion on European level (for instance at the large scale conference in Mechelen 2013) and on national levels (e.g. highlighted in the long processes related to the German DQR or the current large scale Delphi study on suitable organisational validation structures in Germany) shows that there is still a long way to go to achieve the aim to provide instruments and structures that are fit for purpose.

The IMPACT project and the IMPACT report was designed and developed to contribute to the implementation of VINFL on the practical and operational level.

4 For instance in different units in the framework of professions in the retail business

The IMPACT report presented in major shortcomings and substantial issues related to the European practice projects on ECVET and listed and described the relevant 33 ECVET pilot projects that had been subject of a thorough investigation based on the 2009 recommendation by the Council and the Parliament.

2.4.1. Content and Terminology

One of the major issues that hampered a consistent and comparable ECVET procedure was related to terms and terminology of the “ECVET components”. The ECVET recommendation defined (top-down) “qualification”, “units of learning outcomes” and “learning outcomes”. The terminology used by the pilot projects for these “components” largely differs. To give some examples: Instead of “qualification” the terms “core curriculum”, “module” or “field of action” have been used and for “Units” the terms “module” or “certification unit”. Already at this, very basic stage, it is obvious that without a joint terminology the aim of transparent and comparable qualifications cannot be reached.

Without a clear and mandatory naming of the (ECVET) components any discussion about the ECVET implementations and/or re-use of components (e.g. units of learning outcomes) in other contexts is quite difficult.

Insofar the stakeholders involved in validation have to speak a European “Lingua Franca” and use the same terms and terminologies in order to talk about the same things and to be able to exchange knowledge, tools and instruments to gain reasonable benefits from VINFL.

2.4.2. Qualification

According to the ECVET recommendation, a “Qualification” is a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent institution determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to a given standard. It consists of several units of learning outcomes.

As a matter of fact a “Qualification” should have a name and, where appropriate, a description. To enable international cooperation and exchange and to introduce validation on operational level it should be possible to translate “Title” and “Description” in different languages. Often these basic requirements were not achieved – hence there is some space for improvement for some projects.

Other pilot projects⁵ describe cross sectional learning outcomes as part of the qualification. For the first draft of the technical specification (implemented in IMPACT) we interpreted these cross sectional learning outcomes as additional field (as described below for the unit of learning outcomes), but it might be a good task for later versions of the specification to have another look on them.

2.4.3. Unit of Learning Outcomes

According to the ECVET recommendation a “Unit of Learning Outcomes” is a component of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of “Knowledge, Skills and Competence” that can be assessed and validated with a number of associated ECVET points.

The Unit should hold a generic title, the title of the Qualification(s) to which it is related, a reference to the EQF level (of the qualification) and, where appropriate, to the national qualification framework (NQF) level. It should also include the ECVET points associated with it, the Learning Outcomes contained in the Unit, the procedures and criteria for the assessment of these learning outcomes.

⁵ CHEMLAB2, SME MASTER Plus

Some pilot projects⁶ used additional fields to describe the work task (or an example work task), the content of the unit (according to the used curriculum), prerequisites and others. Therefore it should be possible to add additional fields to units of learning outcomes by giving a name and a content field to the description⁷.

A number of projects⁸ use subdivisions of learning outcomes units. Therefore, the technical specification should allow such subdivisions.

As mentioned above it should be possible to give the name, description etc. in different languages but this will be left for a later version.

2.4.4. Learning outcomes

According to the ECVET recommendation learning outcomes are statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process and which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.

Concerning the learning outcomes there are quite different approaches in the pilot projects:

A number of projects (ESTO, ett edu,) described them *as* Knowledge, Skills and Competence(s), others (ECO QUALIFY, ICARE, etc.) describe them *together with* the necessary knowledge, skills and competence.

Some pilot projects (ECVET_BUD, ICARE, etc.) used different amounts of “columns” (e.g. only Knowledge and Skills, no Competence, or 'skills and knowledge' in one category or 'personal and social competences') or they described learning outcomes without any relation to the three columns Knowledge, Skills and Competence.

A technical specification (or probably EQF manuals) might help to clarify these inconsistencies⁹.

Note: There may be good reasons to neglect the order and the taxonomy set up by the European Commission. However, if we agree to achieve a high transparency we need certain common denominators. Here, already at EQF level (which is the highest “Meta” level of national qualification frameworks) there are national discrepancies that will be rather difficult to bridge. Therefore, even if we disagree to the “trinity of knowledge, skills and competences” the authors recommend to stick to these three columns – otherwise the idea of a European wide validation cannot be successful.

2.4.5. ECVET points

According to the recommendations ECVET points are a numerical representation of the overall weight of learning outcomes in a qualification and of the relative weight of units in relation to the qualification.

In most of the pilot projects no concrete ECVET points have been specified for the units of learning outcomes, but most of them indicate the possibility to specify ECVET points or at least a relative weight to the units. In at least one (ICARE) ECVET points are even specified for single learning outcomes.

6 CHEMLAB2, euriac, EASYMETAL, 2GET1CARE and others

7 If some of these additional fields are commonly used it might be a good idea to describe them explicitly in the specification but that is a task for a later draft

8 Aire, PROPER CHANCE, NETINVET, etc.

9 For an IT based repository it might be an option to offer, in addition to the “columns” Knowledge, Skills and Competence the possibility to select the values “NONE” and/or “ALL”. As far as social and personal competences and key competences are concerned, that do not directly relate to qualifications the authors proposed to set up a parallel system like LEVEL5 that facilitate a highly contextualised but nevertheless valid validation software (LEVEL5)

As even the ECVET recommendation is slightly ambiguous at this point the first draft of the technical specification will allow to assign ECVET points to both learning outcomes and units of learning (the same will be true for the assessment criteria, method, etc.).

2.4.6. Model case pilot projects

To conclude: from a total of more than 100 ECVET projects funded since 2007, an amount of 75 projects was pre-selected that at least basically referred to the RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL.

Out of these 75 pilot projects 10 projects have been selected as model cases for the integration into the software based on their level of accordance and feasibility related to the recommendation.

2.4.7. The Full Version of the ECVET Pilot Project Report

The full version of the analysis of available ECVET projects in regard to the ECVET recommendations consists of 110 pages containing a profound survey on 33 ECVET projects and an overview of 75 retrieved ECVET projects.

3. Online Survey of Educational Professionals on VINFL and Learning Technologies

3.1. Intention and Structure

The report aimed at researching the know-how and utilisation of VINFL in different sectors and on ways to improve its feasibility, usability and impact

Within IMPACT a large scale online survey about Validation, OER etc. was launched in November 2014 and kept open until May 2015. The survey was disseminated through the IMPACT website and large scale mail invitations on national level through the IMPACT partners' networks. The main version of the survey was in English, but it was also translated into Polish, Bulgarian and Italian. It was closed with 188 full responses from 19 countries.

The survey was clustered into 5 question areas:

5. Utilisation of web-based learning tools and instruments
6. Utilisation of OER
7. Areas of implementation
8. Validation of learning outcomes and connection to web-based learning and
9. Development of a web-based instrument to connect learning, instruction, assessment and validation.

The survey was answered by 188 educational professionals from 19 European countries.

The distribution reflects the composition of the partner countries, however, also some participants from countries that are not represented in the consortium could be motivated to answer to the survey).

The majority of responses come from Italy (30), followed by Germany (24), Greece (20), Lithuania (22), Bulgaria (20), Portugal (19), Slovakia (19), Poland (16) and Spain (4).

Regarding the professional background of respondents there is a clear majority of trainers and teachers (65%), followed by lecturers with 21,8%, most of the stemming from Adult Education and school education (60 persons), followed by Higher Education (54), Vocational Training (43) and Youth Projects (27).

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Utilisation of web-based learning tools and instruments

Regarding the first question area a fairly high amount of respondents (>50%) is familiar or very familiar with web-based learning and the concept of OER.

There is a rather strong consciousness about the benefits of learning technologies for the educational practice among the 188 respondents.

Highest benefits of web aided learning is seen in:

1. Flexibility regarding the learning place and time (170 of 188),
2. Enrichment of learning resources/media (166),
3. Possibility for self-organised learning (159),
4. Better availability of contents (158),
5. Reutilisation of learning contents (154)

However, only 50% often **use** specific learning technologies (LMS) and only 30% e-Portfolios to collect and document evidences on learners' competence and establish profiles that can be linked to validation.

Major obstacles to the implementation of learning technologies are shortages in resources (time money, access and support).

One can read these figures in this way that there is still a gap between theory and practice – in the sense that, despite the awareness of the strengths of web-supported learning a thorough utilisation of state of the art learning technologies is not yet reached.

3.2.2. Utilisation of OER

When it comes to the utilisation of digital learning materials in their educational practice, most respondents (still) use texts, photos and videos. Being asked about the obstacles that prevent them from using web-based learning contents and learning materials, more than 40% mention license problems.

This is of course one of the major arguments for the promotion of OER as learning materials, contents and instruments. Hence the overwhelming part of the respondents (80%) highlight the benefits of OER.

However, though only <20% of respondents report that they are **not** familiar with the concept of OER there is the slight suspicion that, a good proportion of respondents are not really deeply informed about the concept of OER. There is only very little differentiation between major advantages (e.g. free access) and others points that have to be seen in a more differentiated way (e.g. re-utilisation).

3.2.3. Areas of implementation

The majority of respondents consider web-based learning as very useful for all offered target groups.

There is a prevalence for blended learning solutions and most respondents use web-based learning as addition to traditional forms of learning.

Knowledge is the main competence dimension which is supported by web-based learning, followed by skills and attitudes, however Responsibility and Autonomy (as third EQF-pillar) still score relatively high values.

3.2.4. Validation of learning outcomes and connection to web-based learning

This section aims at understanding how familiar the respondents are with the concept of validation in general and with its instruments and how they see the connections to learning technologies and digitally supported learning.

The respondents first rated the relevance of validation for their own practice as relatively low. Despite this low relevance for the own educational practice (42%) the respondents rated the singular validation elements (identification, documentation, assessment of learning outcomes and also the connection to the learning process as (highly) relevant (mostly around 80%) and another 10-15% fairly relevant. In other words: those who consider the sub-steps as NOT relevant are below 5% and around 5% don't know.

This rather contradictory result leads to the suspicion that the (official) concept of validation is not fully understood by the respondents. The majority of respondents is convinced that they understood the idea – but on the other hand they are not aware of the elements; how else could they consider the central validation elements as very important (“relevant” = 80%) but the concept as a whole just “half relevant (40%)”.

This contradiction can be only explained by the fact that the overall concept still did not reach the practical level – but – and that is the good news – could be easily convincing if it is broken down to its major elements. In other words: Validation would become more “popular and easy to use” if it is considered as a toolbox for identification, assessment and documentation and integrated in the learning processes.

Among the respondents there is a nearly equal distribution of formative and summative assessment purposes and also a prevalence of mixed assessment settings regarding self-, peer and external assessments.

60% of the respondents assess learning outcomes against reference systems – or vice versa 37,2 % never do. This is an interesting point since it opens the question against which references and indicators the measurements and assessments are being carried out. One should keep this result in mind in the discussion of quality criteria (validity, reliability and objectivity). The following finding points in the same direction: Most respondents use their own indicators and reference systems, only partly curricula or other (external) reference points are being used in the own assessment practice.

Documentation of learning outcomes is generally considered less important than assessment and identification and certification. Only 41% of the respondents offer documentation services.

When it comes to certification institutional certificates (60%) and certificates of attendance (37%) are most common, 25% also use external certification, 16% mention ECTS credits. ECVET credits are not very common (4%) and informal certification and documentation is not at all established (badges).

3.2.5. Developing an Open Learning and Validation Environment

Development of a web-based instrument to connect learning, instruction, assessment and validation.

In the last questionnaire section the IMPACT group asked about most useful instruments to be integrated in an open learning space and offered tools for five purposes:

1. Planning
2. Assessment
3. Documenting (and certification)
4. Learning Management Systems and

5. E-portfolio

In general, 40% of the respondents found all proposed instruments useful for a holistic “open learning space” (a competence management and validation tool. Another 33 to 38% rated all offers as “useful”. This means that at least ¾ of the respondents would integrate all five functionalities in an open learning space.

The respondents were asked for a specification of the services that such a system would offer, namely the features/interfaces that it should have. The options for these features were “Must have”, “nice to have”, “not needed” and “don’t know”. Again, most respondents opted with around 90% for at least “nice to have” which means that all proposed features are considered useful. Approximately 5-8% did not have an opinion while between 2 and 5% considered certain options as “not needed”, highest scores (highest rejection; 5%) here in relation to an interface which describes levels of attitudes.

The interfaces for the description of competence levels for knowledge and skills and the documentation of learning outcomes achieved the highest scores as “must haves”, while all other features scored around 50%, which is still a very high rate.

75% of the respondents found all envisaged services useful/very useful. This is a clear voting for a versatile system that interconnects **planning** of competence oriented learning (planning and validation tools like LEVEL5-reference systems) with **delivery** (LMS like moodle), **assessments** (again combination of competence level based reference systems and assessment deliveries via LMS, documentation (e.g. via e-Portfolios), management of own competence (again e-Portfolio) and certification (LEVEL5/ECVET systems), connection to EUROPASS.

Hence the respondents fully agreed to a system which connects different learning technologies with a competence driven learning approach and competence validation components.

3.2.1. The Full Version of the Online Report

The full version of the online report consists of the five sections and tackles 26 questions with 26 graphics on 30 pages.

4. Expert Interviews on VINFL

4.1. Executive Summary

Group or individual interviews were conducted in 8 countries (GR, PT, IT, DE, BG, SK, LT, PL) with education professionals from different sectors of education, including higher education (LT, PT, GR, IT), VET (DE, BG, PL), adult education (SK, BE) as well as corporate world (BG). Some interviewees had a lot of experience in working with Learning Management Systems (LMS) (SK, LT), the others had some experience, whereas some had no experience at all. All participants agreed about the importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VINFL) at all levels of education and in all the sectors they represented.

Those who have more experience in European projects have more developed concepts of validation (IT, BG), yet those are also aware of the complexity of the subject of validation of non-formal and informal learning. In general, there is not much awareness about the validation procedure proposed by the European Commission (identification/documentation/assessment/certification) and an increasingly intensive discussion on how to embed counselling (career coaching) and further training in this procedure (see DIE-Forum, 12/2015). On the other side, there were those who had a limited concept of VINFL with high hesitations regarding the dangers of subjectivity in validation of non-formal learning (PL).

Personal and organizational competences, especially teamwork (PL) are appreciated by employers. Non-formal learning and transversal competences are highly appreciated when companies select students for internships or work in HE and also crucial for career development and progression (PT, LT). Non-formal and informal learning (e.g., volunteering, active participation) may be even a more deciding factor in determining personal and career success than academic achievements (i.e. the best academic achievers are not necessarily most successful in employment). Non-formal competences matter a lot for life and employment and their validation may be very motivating for the learners of all ages and informative for the employer (LT).

Some participants - working in different educational sectors (Higher Education, Adult Education, VET) - have pointed out the importance of validation of informal and non-formal learning for migrants.

The participants highlighted the key role played by mobile devices in supporting learning especially in Adult Education, as well as the use of self-produced videos as a tool to prove acquired competences.

It was clear that the development of an IT tool to validate transversal competences that could be applied and trusted EU-wide would be very important and helpful (PT). Finally, all participants agreed about the need for customized and flexible tools to support validation (IT, PT, LT, BG, DE). Participants in all countries agreed that validation systems integrated in VLE are very much wanted and anticipated, but the connection of virtual learning environments and validation is expected to be „easy to use“. Virtual learning environments could be as intuitively automatized as possible (e.g., using key words, recognition of associations, etc.) to require less support and provide a maximum of objectivity (LT, BG, SK).

The possibility to connect such procedures to IT based learning systems is attractive, but needs to be based on sound description of learning outcomes and transparent criteria and procedures. Also, respective technical competences to establish and maintain these systems on organisational level are needed (DE). There is agreement that instruments have to be contextualised – which leads to the idea that the LEVEL5 tools have served a high adaptability – in other words: they have to be so flexible that they can carry different contexts, contents, serve different target groups etc.

The realisation of the IMPACT project and the dissemination of the IMPACT methodology would contribute to the above outlined gaps of knowledge and needs for user-friendly online systems for both learning and validation.

4.2. Partner/National Summaries

4.2.1. Greece

In Greece, we conducted one-on-one interviews among professionals who represent the full range of experience and opinion and all of them pointed out that validation is the key for providing effective non-formal and informal learning as it can contribute to enhancing people's careers, both in content and duration.

Respondents reported that recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning entails comparison of the learning and experience of a learner, howsoever obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements. Also, they appreciate that applying learning management systems is lifesaving for the current reality in HE where attending classes is optional enhancing student's engagement as they become part of everyday life of the academic environment. All the experts highlighted that an online validation system helps educators to check their own knowledge, methods and practices to improve them by bringing them in contact with new ideas and theories and in some way, validates them. Considered as very important the fact that ICT LMSs facilitate open access to knowledge from society with the goal of increasing the per capita rate of knowledge for personal and professional development. Also, respondents suggested virtual learning environments should be easily used by anyone and have a pleasant environment.

4.2.2. Portugal

The interviews in Portugal were conducted individually to professionals with diverse experiences related to transversal competences development, identification and validation.

As a resume, it was clear the importance that non-formal learning and transversal competences are assuming when the companies select students for internships or work and also crucial for career development and progression, nevertheless it is always mentioned that transversal competences are subjective and difficult to measure. When the LEVEL5 methodology was presented all the interviewees mentioned great appreciation on the development of a validation methodology and also in a system to link the validation and the virtual learning environments in an IT platform. In some interviews, it was also referred the possible use of the validation tool to choose future competences to develop and to enrich the curriculum through the validation of informal learning.

It was underlined that the validation system to be developed would have to be trustworthy, European wide and easy to use. Those characteristics would allow comparability from one country to another and learners and companies could really trust and use the certificates linked to the system.

As final sentence, it was clear that the development of an IT tool to validate transversal competences that could be applied and trusted EU wide would be very important and helpful.

4.2.3. Italy

Respondents to the interviews conducted in Italy belonged to different professional fields and socio-economic areas. They also declared to have different experiences with validation in general. Consequently, the participants' knowledge about validation of non-formal and informal learning at theoretical and practical levels is particularly varied. Despite their different background and experiences with respect to validation, all participants agreed that validation of informal and non-formal learning has become a central issue at all levels of education and in all the sectors they represented. Moreover, it is important to highlight

that even though all participants have a good knowledge about the validation processes at theoretical level, the concepts of validation and evaluation have been sometimes confused by the interviewed.

An interesting consideration came from the schoolteachers. In particular, they complain about the lack of adequate training to implement competence based education (CBE) in everyday teaching, since the informative material and guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education are considered as not satisfactory. When it comes to the validation of competences related to socio-relational and communicative spheres, some participants emphasized the difficulties in coping with this scenario, and suggest an approach based on the use of videos.

In some of the cases described during the interviews, the validation has been connected to the frequency and duration of learning activities, and the use of Learning Outcomes and Learning Units had a marginal role. Moreover, even though all the participants are aware of the problems related to the validation of informal and non-formal learning, those with experiences in EU funded projects show a better understanding of these issues. Relevant insights came from some participants - working in different educational sectors (Higher Education, Adult Education, VET) - that have pointed out the importance of validation of informal and non-formal learning for migrants. In addition, one of them suggested the idea of "learners as self-producers of evidences related to the acquired competences".

As a conclusion, the participants highlighted the key role played by mobile devices in supporting learning especially in Adult Education, as well as the use of self-produced videos as a tool to prove acquired competences. Finally, all participants agreed about the need for customized and flexible tools to support validation.

4.2.4. Bulgaria

The interviews in Bulgaria were conducted with representatives from both the VET sector and the private sector.

Two main issues were identified during the qualitative research. Firstly, the trainers expressed a big concern regarding the high number of trainees, who are computer illiterate and may not be able to use online learning methodologies (incl. the IMPACT product). Secondly, some of the participants expressed a preference for live-trainings compared to online courses. However, such unwillingness to expand the f2f training with other online technologies might come from the lack of sufficient knowledge about the benefits of blended learning and from the lack of suitable, user friendly, easy-to-use systems that would make this process easier.

The heterogenic group of interviewees resulted also in big differences in their responses. There was a big gap in the perception of importance regarding the validation of non-formal learning – the participants of the VET sector are already working in this direction and think it is crucially important, while the representatives from the corporate sector have a different perspective and measure the learning progress with the achievement of the business goals. It is again an open question whether their attitudes would change if they knew the positive additional effects on both company and employee when validation is used (e.g. increased self-reflection, transfer of trained material into practice etc.).

The realisation of the IMPACT project and the dissemination of the IMPACT methodology would contribute to the above outlined gaps of knowledge and needs for user-friendly online systems for both learning and validation. This importance of the project was also confirmed during the interviews - all of the participants identified the importance of the IMPACT project and are ready to implement the foreseen online product in their practice.

4.2.5. Slovakia

The target group of our interviews were people involved in adult education. All the respondents are experienced as trainers as well as management of adult education. They come from different sectors – academic, corporate, non-governmental.

Most of the respondents have some experience with validation. They are generally all aware that importance of validation is increasing and there is a need for systematic approach. Especially specific target groups, such as young people, who would welcome an opportunity to be able to evidence ones learning outcomes. There is a general agreement that validation has a huge potential. In one case, there is even a systematic process set up to validate competences of employees gained in informal learning situation. This is quite a sophisticated system containing various levels and well elaborated assessment methods.

Use of learning technologies in validation is rather limited if any. Respondents use learning platforms such as MOODLE and are aware of advantages. They highlight particularly interactivity, effectiveness and practical aspects (accessibility of materials, flexibility as to time, etc.). Some respondents are even very experienced in creating and managing courses on learning platforms. Despite all this, they do not have much experience using learning platforms for validation. Even if validation happens, it is very often done using paper questionnaires and at most excel sheets.

We can conclude that validation of competences in informal learning and its benefits are recognised. However, practical application is rather unsystematic and carried out in individual programs with no or very little standardisation, unification or transferability to different areas. The use of technologies is very limited and there is a huge space for improvements.

4.2.6. Lithuania

Validation of non-formal competencies is very important and needed in all sectors of education including HE. Following Bologna declaration each course in HE needs to be described in terms of learning outcomes that learners will achieve after taking a course. Accordingly, each course is constructed to provide a segment of competencies that are needed to lead to a professional qualification of a given study program according to the EQF. However, this is not related to social and personal competencies as such, but may be connected.

Non-formal and informal learning (e.g., volunteering, active participation) may be even a more deciding factor in determining personal and career success than academic achievements (i.e. the best academic achievers are not necessarily most successful in employment). Non-formal competences matter a lot for life and employment and their validation may be very motivating for the learner and informative for the employer.

Connection of virtual learning environments and validation is very much wanted and anticipated, but solutions to its effective functioning are not very clear, however, it is expected to be „easy to use“. Virtual learning environments could be as intuitively automatized as possible (e.g., using key words, recognition of associations, etc.) to require less support and provide a maximum of objectivity.

The participants of the discussion think that there is a need for a systemic approach (i.e. more formalized) to the validation of non-formal learning on the European level. This should not mean necessarily unified tools, but a unified strategy would help.

Validation of non-formal competencies in terms of locating learner's level of a competence may be a very motivating learning facilitator at all ages – from children to seniors.

4.2.7. Poland

Validation of non-formal competencies could determine personal and career development. The question is the reliability of validation system and objectiveness of the evaluator.

All respondents understand the need of developing of soft competences and know that employers really want potential employees with high soft skills (especially regarding team work). However, even in formal context, employers prefer to check the skills themselves.

There were some major disagreements. Respondents had different priorities and opinion about learning and validating. Three out of five respondents did not really like the idea of validating of non-formal and informal competences due to possible subjectivity reasons.

It was interesting that all the respondents see the difference in the learners' soft competences while teaching in formal education and therefore they are aware of the different potential of the learners. At the same time, they are aware that it is difficult to validate students' soft competences in an objective way.

Summing up, validation of non-formal competencies is important but difficult to implement in a reliable way.

4.2.8. Germany

There is not much awareness about the validation procedure proposed by the Commission (identification/documentation/assessment/certification) and an increasingly intensive discussion on how to embed counselling (career coaching) and further training in this procedure (see DIE-Forum, 12/2015). Hence there is still a multitude of understandings about terms and terminology which is not really helpful to develop operational solutions.

Participants of the discussion, stemming from different educational fields, agreed that the validation is mainly dependent on the purpose: if the purpose is less formal (e.g. to empower learners to expand their competences) formative assessments are useful – for qualification purposes summative assessments (that nevertheless have to be fit on purpose (and correspond to the envisaged competence level) is the right choice.

There is agreement upon the necessity to adapt the systems in regard to context, target group etc., for instance a profilPASS as acknowledged "identification"-tool cannot simply be applied in a school or in a group of refugees. Instruments have to be contextualised – which leads to the idea that the tools have served a high adaptability – in other words: they have to be so flexible that they can carry different contexts, contents, serve different target groups etc.

When discussing the LEVEL5 reference systems, the idea was taken on board to develop so called "action fields" to describe the acting situation of the learners and to transfer them in a next step into a learning field (which is then represented by the reference system as basis for competence descriptions and derived learning outcomes, contents and learning materials ("learning objects"), assignments and assessments.

According to the different purposes of VINFL systems, desirable features of IT based systems vary. Generally, they should anticipate limits of available resources of the educational professionals in practice applying them and add value against existing analogue procedures, they should be easy and quick to use.

The possibility to connect such procedures to IT based learning systems is attractive, but needs to be based on sound description of learning outcomes and transparent criteria and procedures. Also, respective technical competences to establish and maintain these systems on organisational level are needed.

4.2.9. The Full Version of the Interviews

The full version of the interviews consists of filled group interview patterns that describe the interviewees (target group, their backgrounds and experiences) and 6 main question fields related to

- Their knowledge and practical experience on validation of non-formal and informal learning and the relevance for their professional fields,
- Their experiences in working with online learning systems/learning environments and online validation systems,
- Learning technologies used, expectations and recommendations on online (or technology supported) validation systems.