



GUIDELINES

Welcome to Validation

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Introduction for HE Professionals

These guidelines are designed to help professionals in higher education (HE) to explain validation of prior learning (VPL) to newcomers (i.e. migrants and/or refugees) and to show them how it might facilitate their entry higher education programmes of study.

The guidelines are structured around frequently asked questions that we have identified based on consultation with a wide variety of minority groups participating in HE across Europe. The answers are formulated in simple and straightforward language to be accessible and clear to people who have little idea of what validation is and what it might mean for them. However, we have also tried to introduce some of the key terms and vocabulary that they will encounter if they wish to proceed in a validation process.

We therefore hope that these will be useful to HE professionals as a general introduction for newcomers, which can be used with very little editing and that it will be easy to add to and/or adapt them to the specifics (and sometimes complexities) of regulations and practice. In particular:

- For simplicity, we have used the term validation of prior learning (VPL) throughout this paper but we recognise that other terminology (e.g. VPL, VNIL, RPL, APEL, VAE, RVCC, etc) may be used in a particular HE institution or country and this will need to be edited.
- We have assumed that HE professionals will add links in the text, which are specific to their own institution and where necessary to specific faculties, subjects and diplomas. We have provided *'Notes for professionals'* at the end of some Answers where it is not sensible to give general information but where specific information can easily be added.
- We have also assumed that the full technical, administrative and regulatory detail governing VPL is on the institution's website. These guidelines are designed to be a first step in more user-friendly language to give an introduction not all the detail but we have also suggested where there should be a web link to the full detail.
- We also recommend that institutions add a section on their websites specifically for newcomers, which could include these guidelines complete with suggested site for further information especially the contact details of a professional in the institution who can give concrete advice.

The frequently asked questions that structure these guidelines are:

- What is validation of prior learning?
- How can validation help me enter higher education?
- How can experience be validated?
- What is the situation for young people who do not have much - or any - work experience?
- Why is validation important? Why is it important for newcomers?
- How does validation operate? What will I have to do and what help will I get?
- What happens after the validation process?
- How does the advice and guidance work?
- How much time does the validation procedure take?
- How much does it cost? What help can I get to pay for it?
- Where can I find out more?

We have not included an explanation of the development of policy and practice of LLL and VPL in Europe but if additional information is required we suggest the following websites as useful resources **for European policy and documentation**:

- CEDEFOP, European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning:
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3073>
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4148>
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/cs/publications-and-resources/publications/4153>
- CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) about [financing and potential funding](#) for the VPL arrangement
- CEDEFOP about [documentation tools](#)

For national and institutional arrangements in different countries, we suggest:

- the VINCE [country profiles](#)
- the CEDEFOP [validation inventory](#)
- your own institutional resources and ruling

For the web sources that are relevant to your particular country, if you do not already know them you will be able to find them easily.

For information for the applicants we suggest that you give specific web links as part of the answers to specific questions (we have suggested in the **Notes for HE professionals**) rather than a link to all the information in one link which may be daunting for newcomers and is not usually in very user-friendly language.

Introduction for newcomers

Welcome to these guidelines on Validation!

You might wonder what is Validation - this concept might be new to you. Validation is the process of documenting, assessing and recognising and/or validating previous studies or learning acquired outside the classroom. The main objective behind this process is for you to obtain recognition of your skills and/or validation of your knowledge in the form of a certificate or credits that can help you achieve a diploma.

It all sounds complicated, but behind this process there are many experienced professionals that will help you and guide you through it.

The FAQs that follow will answer many of the questions you might have now.

We hope you decide to go through this process and that at the end of it you can either enrol in further studies or find a job aligned with your experience and studies.

Questions and answers for newcomers

Q: What is Validation of Prior Learning?

A: Validation of prior learning (VPL) is a tool promoted and supported by the EU and all Member States to enable educational institutions to recognise learning wherever it has taken place. It is based on the idea that people learn outside the classroom as well as inside it across a wide range of activities (sometimes called life wide learning) and at various times throughout the lifetime of an individual (lifelong learning) and that this learning is valuable, and can be identified and recognised.

All education and training systems include the idea of examinations to pass from one level to the next. The transition from upper secondary to higher levels studies is particularly important and requires specific certificates or diplomas awarded for success in examinations. And within [higher education](#) entry to masters level programmes also has special regulations. Many people for different reasons do not have the necessary diplomas but do have the knowledge, understanding and skills to succeed in higher education. Validation provides an alternative and parallel system for recognising this and enabling people in this situation to enter programmes of study at a higher level.

Q: How can validation help me to enter higher education?

A: Validation can help in different ways depending on your situation

If you have the certificate or diploma that enables you to enter higher education in your own country, you may not need validation. In the European Union all countries have national agencies [NARIC](#) which help universities to understand and verify diplomas issued in other countries, and there is someone in each university who has this responsibility.

If you did not complete your studies, were not able to take the examinations, or if you have lost your diploma or it has been destroyed, or if it cannot be verified because of conflict, political or economic crisis in home country, then validation may be able to help you because it offers an alternative way to demonstrate what you know, understand and can do without having to start at the beginning again.

If you have not followed a formal curriculum in a classroom setting that leads to the usual entry qualifications, then validation is particularly useful to you because it can take account of other forms of learning.

If you have participated in short courses, organised study visits, work placements, work-based learning, skills training that did not lead to a certificate or diploma but were important in your personal and professional development, validation can help you get recognition for this 'non-formal learning'.

If you have been in paid or unpaid work, taken part in voluntary activities (for example in trade unions or NGOs) **or you have an individual interest** that you have pursued (anything from motor mechanics to ancient history) then you have learned

from those experiences and validation can help you get recognition for this ‘informal learning’.

In practice, you may have a mixture of these things, for example, some certificates but not enough or not quite the right ones, some work-based training, some special individual interest. Validation can help you to **bring all this learning together**, to review it and demonstrate it. You can then compare this to the formal curriculum of higher education study that you wish to enter.

So validation can **help you to enter** a specific course or programme of studies. In some cases, it **can also enable you to obtain credits for part of the formal course of study** so that you do not have to follow the whole programme but can take a shortened version to obtain the full diploma more quickly. And in some cases it may be possible to obtain the whole diploma in this way.

Q: How can experience be validated?

A: The answer here is quite clear. It is not the experience that is validated but what you have learned from that experience. What knowledge skills and understanding have you acquired through that experience? Can you identify, analyse and evaluate what you have learned from that experience and relate it to the programme of study you wish to follow? These might be practical skills, for example laboratory skills in a particular discipline or intellectual skills of analysis and synthesis that are relevant to many disciplines. It is these skills and the knowledge that goes with them that are the object of the validation - not the experience which is contextual rather than central to the validation process.

Q: What is the situation for young people who do not have much - or any - work experience?

A: If you have only recently left school, then you will not have the same kind of experience as someone who has been working for some years. However, you may have been working alongside school studies, you may have been involved in voluntary work, social, sporting or cultural activities, or you may have experience of conflict - and you have learned from all this experience. And that learning can be taken into account by validation.

You can also take part in special courses that prepare you for higher education and take into account what you have learned as well as what you have studied at school.

Note for HE professionals: If there are any special courses in your institution – add them here

Q: Why is validation important? Why is validation important for newcomers?

A: Validation is important because it provides an alternative route into higher education for people who did not have the opportunity to enter directly from school or who have been denied that opportunity for social and economic reasons. For newcomers it also

offers help to overcome the effects of conflict, political and economic crisis and the disruption to their personal and professional development that has followed.

Access to education and training is extremely important for access to the labour market, to active participation in society, and to the cultural life of society, and so to social inclusion. This will be important for an application for permission to stay and work or for citizenship

Q: How does validation operate? What will I have to do and what help will I get?

A: There are 5 main stages in the validation process: Information, Identification, Documentation, Assessment, Validation

- **Information:** The first step is for you to obtain the information about what is possible and how to start the process. This is more than getting pieces of paper – it involves a discussion about the general arrangements, the possibilities and the limits, and specific rules or regulations.

Notes for HE professionals: You could add here a note about where they should go, how they should make first contact and a web link. For example: Is there a central validation office? Or is the process managed at faculty level?

- **Identification:** When you have had time to reflect on the general information, your next step is to have a focussed conversation about what course(s) you would like to do, what courses are available, what diplomas, knowledge and skills you have to follow the course. In practice, this might mean several conversations with different people in the institution, for example: the member of academic staff who is responsible for the course, a student who is taking the course, an administrator, or an adviser. It is important that you are clear what the legal framework is for the procedure, your rights and the limits of the possibilities not just within the process but which doors it will open and which will remain closed (if any). All these will be important in helping you to make a decision about which course or diploma you will work towards. Usually there is one person who be help you to coordinate these activities and to make your decision.

Note to HE professionals: Add the contact details of any key professional responsible for the process in your institution. Include a note of any constraints following the programme: for example, do all professions accept this process in your country?

- **Documentation:** The third step is to put together your portfolio of evidence to show that you have the knowledge, understanding and skills you need and the criteria that will be used to assess them.
The evidence might include:
 - Certificates, diplomas, documents about the content of any academic or vocational/professional courses you have taken, evidence of employment, voluntary experience.
 - References or letters of support and recommendation from teachers, trainers, employers, colleagues

- Self-evaluation and reflection reports – you will probably be given a form of some kind which guides you through this process
- Test results – you may be given some tests so that you can show what you know
- Demonstrations – you may be asked to demonstrate a particular technique (for example in a laboratory)
- Reports, articles and other papers that you have written
- Conferences, seminars that you have attended
- Evidence of language skills

It may be necessary to get some of these documents translated by an approved translator – this will be made clear by your advisor

This may seem an almost impossible list of documents to produce and you may not be able to produce some of them but do not worry – validation is designed to overcome such problems and the professionals who work with you are experienced in finding ways to solve them. And you will have an adviser to help you throughout the process. There may also be meetings with others who are going through the same process or have already completed it so that you can get peer support.

Note to HE professionals: You should provide any templates here and contact details of other students, help group meetings and so on

- **Assessment:** When you and your advisor think your portfolio is ready then you enter the assessment phase. The way this happens may be different in different institutions and different faculties depending of the subject of the course. Sometimes it is a one-to-one interview, sometimes it is a small panel including an academic from the relevant discipline and a professional from the field, such as a practising economist or engineer; sometimes it is a combination of these. Your advisor will explain the process to you and help you prepare for it.

Note to HE professionals: There are almost certainly rules and regulations about this and they are undoubtedly too long and complex to include in these guidelines but you could perhaps produce a separate page that sets them out simply and clearly with a link to the full details on-line. It is particularly important that it is clear what the role of the advisor is in the assessment process.

- **Validation:** The result of the assessment process is usually validation – that is a formal recognition of the knowledge and skills you have demonstrated successfully. It may take different forms:
 - A certificate of diploma of some kind
 - The award of credits
 - A formal statement authorising entry to a particular course

Usually the result is a positive one – your advisor is unlikely to recommend that you go forward to assessment unless he or she thinks you have a reasonable chance of success. However, it may not be exactly what you expected, for example you might not be awarded as many credits as you need to do exactly what you planned but you will be given advice on what to do next.

Note for HE professionals: You could insert here the range of possible outcomes of the assessment and validation procedure available in your institution – we have assumed here that it is a not a simple yes/no or pass/fail outcome.

Q: What happens after the validation process?

A: This will depend on the outcome of the validation.

If you get a clear result that means you can enter the programme of studies that you planned at the level that you planned, then you probably need only to complete the administrative papers, and do some reading to prepare yourself.

If you get a less clear result you may be asked:

- to do something extra
- to provide more evidence
- to do some additional preparation e.g. improve your language skills
- to think about another course that might suit you better

If this happens, your advisor will help you to work out what to do.

Note to HE professionals: The content of this answer will depend on what results are possible in your institution – you will need to edit accordingly.

Q: How does the advice and guidance work?

A: Advice and guidance will be in place all through the process as you can see above but there may be rules about how much advice you are entitled to. You may have more than one advisor: for example, someone to explain your legal rights and sort out funding arrangements for you, someone to help you with the various stages of the procedure, someone from the specific discipline or course that you want to study, someone who can explain careers and job opportunities linked to the courses and so on. But there is usually one person who is your main point of contact and who will coordinate the process.

You might also get advice from the students union or other student organisations and from people who have been through the process themselves

Notes for HE professionals: This is a very important issue for applicants but it is especially important for newcomers. We know that in some institutions and some countries the role of the advisor and the amount of time an applicant is entitled to are very clearly defined. In others it is much more flexible and negotiable. Either way this should be transparent and you should think about adding a note here explaining that briefly, editing it to match your arrangements and adding a link to the full detail.

Q: How much time does the validation procedure take?

A: This depends very much on the individual and on the specific arrangements for different programmes of study – engineering for example may be different from the

social sciences. Some people start slowly and then speed up and for others it is the opposite. Some people will have some documents, others none. So it is not possible to give a precise answer but normally in the first phase of the process this will be discussed and it will be possible to have some idea of the length of time it will take.

However, it is important to understand that validation is not a fast track procedure or a second class procedure – it is very important for everyone involved that it is transparent and rigorous process so that the value of the qualification obtained through this route is the same as any other.

Note for HE professionals: If there are any regulations in your institution or your country about time limits – add them here

Q: How much does it cost? What help can I get to pay for it?

A: The cost and funding of the validation procedure varies differs according to the status of the individual and differs between institutions, regions and countries.

Note for professionals: You should add information here about the cost and funding possibilities in your institution for validation in general and any special arrangement for newcomers.

Q: Where can I find out more?

A: You will notice that under each question there is a way to find out more. But if in doubt ask your advisor or the person identified as the key contact person in the institution.

Note for professionals: You should add the same contact information here that you put under the question: How does validation operate? What will I have to do and what help will I get? Tell them where they should go, how they should make first contact and a web link. For example: Is there a central validation office? Or is the process managed at faculty level?

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