



METHODOLOGY
FOR ASSESSMENT AND VALIDATION
OF DIGITAL, NUMERACY AND LITERACY SKILLS
FOR ADULT EDUCATION AND COUNSELLORS

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TABLE OF CONTENT

1.	INTRODUCTION	4
2.	THE ADULT AT THE CENTRE OF THE BASIC SKILLS ASSESSMENT	5
2.1.	INTRODUCTION	5
2.2.	WHO ARE EUROPE’S LOW-SKILLED ADULTS?	6
2.3.	MEETING THE NEEDS OF LOW-SKILLED ADULTS	8
2.4.	MOTIVATION FOR VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING (VNFIL) 10	
2.4.1.	Identifying non-formal and informal learning	11
2.5.	HOW TO PLACE AND KEEP THE ADULT AT THE CENTRE OF THE VALIDATION PROCESS	12
3.	THE ASSESSMENT OF THE BASIC SKILLS	15
3.1.	INTRODUCTION	15
3.2.	FACTORS CHARACTERISING THE COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT	18
3.3.	WHAT IS THE BASIC SKILLS ASSESSMENT?	19
3.4.	BASIC SKILLS: LITERACY, NUMERACY AND DIGITAL SKILLS	21
3.5.	TASKS OF COUNSELLOR IN THE BASIC SKILLS ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE	22
4.	THE PROCESS OF VALIDATION OF COMPETENCIES	23
4.1.	INTRODUCTION	23
4.2.	THE VALIDATION PROCESS	24
4.3.	THE PHASES OF VALIDATION PROCESS	25
4.3.1.	Identification	25
4.3.2.	Documentation	26
4.3.3.	Assessment	26
4.3.4.	Certification	27
4.4.	PRINCIPLES OF VALIDATION PROCESS	28
4.5.	REQUIREMENT TO DEVELOP A VALIDATION PROCESS	29
4.6.	QUALITY IN THE COMPETENCY VALIDATION PROCESS	30
4.7.	CONTEXT OF VALIDATION	31
4.7.1.	Validation in education and training	31
4.7.2.	Evaluation in companies	32
		1

4.7.3.	Audit of competencies and labour market	32
4.7.4.	Validation in volunteering	32
4.8.	ROLES OF THE PROFESSIONALS INVOLVED IN THE VALIDATION PROCESS	33
4.8.1.	Counsellor	33
4.8.2.	Assessor	34
4.8.3.	Other practitioners involved in the process	35
5.	THE COMPETENCY VALIDATION PROCESS FROM THE COUNSELLOR'S PERSPECTIVE	35
5.1.	INTRODUCTION	35
5.2.	THE IMPORTANCE OF GUIDANCE IN VALIDATION OF COMPETENCIES	36
5.2.1.	Ethical guidance practice	37
5.2.2.	Real world tension	38
5.2.3.	Quality	38
5.3.	COMPETENCES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE COUNSELLOR IN THE COMPETENCY VALIDATION PROCESS	40
5.3.1.	Competences of counsellors	41
5.3.2.	Functions of the counsellor in the validation process	43
5.4.	THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELLOR IN THE VALIDATION PROCESS	45
5.4.1.	Before the process of validation	46
5.4.2.	Getting to know the adult	48
5.4.3.	Identification	49
5.4.4.	Documentation	54
5.4.5.	Assessment	59
5.4.6.	Certification	62
5.4.7.	Follow-up and continuity in the validation process	64
6.	REFERENCES	65
7.	GLOSSARY OF TERMS	71

1. INTRODUCTION

This document is a contribution to an Erasmus+ project called GLAS (Guidance for Low-skilled Adults towards Skills Assessment and Validation). This project aims to develop a methodology for the assessment and validation of digital, numeracy and literacy skills for adult education and guidance services practitioners, compiled with implementation guidelines that will provide concrete measures and common principles for basic skills assessment and validation. In the project, we will include low-skilled adults in the process of screening, assessment, and in the process of the validation of their basic skills. They will then receive an individual's skill record, which will include the counsellor's opinion of achieved level of skills in coherence with EQF, and recommendations for further education and training programs (e.g., Strong areas, weak areas, recommendations for the future).

This document is composed of information related to the competence validation process. It is intended as a reference manual for practitioners in the counselling of low-skilled adults. It will be the basis for further work in the GLAS project with the implementation of guidelines with adult education and guidance practitioners as well as professionals (counsellors, advisors, etc.).

Our focus is to develop innovative methodologies and implementation guidelines and train adult education and guidance service practitioners to use those methodologies. For this reason, in the first chapter, we talk about the adult as the focus of the assessment. Then, we describe the assessment of basic skills. In the third chapter, we gather information on the validation of competences procedure, considering the guidelines set by CEDEFOP. In the last chapter, we focus our attention on the counsellor, considering the role they develop in each phase of the process and the different tools that they can use in different situations.

2. THE ADULT AT THE CENTRE OF THE BASIC SKILLS ASSESSMENT

2.1. INTRODUCTION

‘Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.’

President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen, Speech to the European Parliament, January 2021

We are presented with opportunities to learn every day. Beyond the formal classroom setting, we can acquire the most valuable of knowledge, skills, and competences in our daily lives, be it at work, at home or during leisure time.

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, Second edition, CEDEFOP 2015

According to UNESCO lifelong learning covers formal, non-formal and informal learning in all settings of study, work, social and community engagement and leisure. However, non-formal and informal learning is often ignored and undervalued. GLAS focuses on the validation of low-skilled adults' numeracy, language and digital skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts (UIL, 2015).

For a holistic assessment of adults' basic skills, it is important to identify and describe skills which adults have achieved, independent of the context in which they were acquired. That is those which are already recognised, those which have achieved some (but not all) learning outcomes from a non-formal learning course or programme and skills which have been acquired in informal learning contexts.

Formal learning occurs in a structured, systemic way (EUROSTAT, 2016). It can be described by a series of learning outcomes, which can be measured by tracking of pre/post-event learning and skill development. It can be defined as ‘education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned through public organisations and recognised private bodies. Qualifications from formal education are by definition recognised by external stakeholders such as employers, and educational institutions are included in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (EUROSTAT, 2011).

Non-formal learning (LIAM, 2021) takes place with guidance, usually outside the formal learning environment. For adults, non-formal learning can take place in community settings as part of adult education services or can be delivered in the workplace. Non-formal learning programmes are generally described by learning outcomes, which can be measured but are not always governed by external assessment or accreditation. However, some adult learning programmes include additional skills e.g., a blended language course could also develop participants' digital skills.

Informal learning tends to happen as learners engage in activities done with a purpose other than for learning. This type of learning can be harder to measure as there are typically no defined learning outcomes or assessment process. Informal learning occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through interests and activities of individuals (LIAM, 2021).

The EU Council Recommendation of 2012 (2013), on the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the Council resolution on lifelong learning encouraged Member States to consider:

‘... ways of ‘enabling people to benefit from support in obtaining validation and recognition on the labour market of their formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes, to safeguard their employment and maintain their employability, in particular during the second part of their careers’.

The systems different European countries have in place to deliver this resolution vary widely concerning validating informal and non-formal learning outcomes. Especially, when it comes to accessible valid and reliable validation methods for disadvantaged groups such as migrants, long-term unemployed, those who live in adverse community environments and circumstances, and those who missed or had negative experiences of formal education.

The implementation guidelines describe how practitioners can support low-skilled adults throughout the 4-stage validation process: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification. However, identification, documentation and assessment are inextricably linked. Without identifying non-formal and informal learning, it is not possible to assess or document that learning.

In this chapter, we focus on low-skilled adults, their needs, how can keep them involved in the process and the importance of the adult being at the centre of the process.

2.2. WHO ARE EUROPE’S LOW-SKILLED ADULTS?

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) has provided, to date, a unique data set on differences between the levels of basic skills (e.g., information processing skills) of adult populations across countries. The survey assesses the proficiency levels of adults (aged 16-65) in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments. The first PIAAC cycle, which included three rounds, was conducted between 2011 and 2018. Across countries (the EU Member States and non-EU countries), between around 8 % and 39 % of adults are low performers in both literacy and numeracy (the average for the 20 participating EU Member States is 16.0 %). Turkey registers the highest figure (39.0 %), followed by Spain, Italy, Greece, Slovenia and France (in descending order), where between 18.1 % and 22.5 % of adults have low levels of skills in both literacy and numeracy. At the other end of the spectrum are Czechia, Finland, Cyprus, Slovakia, Estonia, the Netherlands and Norway (in ascending order), where no more than 10 % of adults are low performers in literacy and numeracy. Alongside adults with low levels of

achievement in both literacy and numeracy, there are also those with low scores in only one area (i.e., literacy or numeracy). When adding these adults to the aforementioned group, the proportion is 57 % in Turkey and between 30 % and 40 % in a number of EU Member States (Italy, Spain, Greece, France and Slovenia, in descending order). The average for the 20 EU Member States is around 28 %. None of the countries covered by this report registers fewer than 15 % of adults who are low performers in literacy and/or numeracy (EURYDICE, 2021).

In the EU-27 on average, 30 % of adults (aged 25-64) have low levels of digital skills and around 1 % have no digital skills. The skills of a further 10 % of adults could not be assessed because they had not used the internet in the three months prior to the survey. Considering that this last group is likely to include individuals with limited digital skills, around 40 % of adults in the EU may be seen as a group at risk of digital exclusion. As far as individual European countries (EU Member States and non-EU countries) are concerned, the highest proportions of adults with low levels of digital skills and no digital skills – between 40 % and 56 % – are observed in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Cyprus, Latvia, Bulgaria, Turkey and Poland (in descending order). Most of these countries also register high proportions of adults whose skills could not be evaluated because they had not used the internet in the three months prior to the survey (10 % or more in all the aforementioned countries except Latvia). When considering all the three categories – i.e., adults with low levels of digital skills, those with no digital skills and those whose skills could not be assessed – Bosnia and Herzegovina register the highest figure (76 %), followed by North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania, where the proportion is around 70 %, and Turkey, with a proportion of 66 % (EURYDICE, 2021).

If we focus on the countries participating in the GLAS consortium, considering the results obtained from the PIAAC, Slovenian adults scored below the European average. Slovenia's youth and adult population (25-34 years old) scored 256 points in literacy, compared to the OECD average of 266 points. In numeracy, they scored one point above the average (272 points), also outperforming older people (55-65 years) in this area. In Slovenia, almost 20% of the adult population (aged 16-65) reported having no previous experience with computers and lacking basic computer skills. However, 25% of the adult population score higher in problem solving in technological environments. In the case of Belgium, adults have higher literacy and numeracy skills than the OECD average. The adult population scores 275 in literacy, compared to the OECD average of 266. In numeracy, they score 280, more than 20 points above the average. About 10% of adults have had no experience with computers. In contrast, 35% of the adult population score at the highest levels in problem solving in technology-rich environments. Adults (aged 16-65) in Spain have a below-average level of proficiency in literacy and numeracy. In Spain, they score 252 in literacy while the average in other countries is 266 points. In numeracy, Spanish adults have 246 points, whereas the European average is almost 20 points higher. In the area of technological problem solving, Spain has not participated. In literacy, the UK scored above the average of 269 points. In numeracy, adults scored

259 points above the European average of 262, a minimal difference in score. In technology, they scored 29 points, one point below the average for the other countries (OECD, 2019).

Europe's low-skilled adults are not a homogenous group. However, there are characteristics and circumstances that affect particular demographic groups that determine their experiences, life opportunities and outcomes, which reflect local, regional, national and global systemic inequalities, and failures of social, economic and education systems.

To understand this, two sets of limiting life experiences and circumstances are important:

- Those who have adverse childhood experiences (Public health Scotland, 2021)
- Those who had no or interrupted and/or negative experiences of initial formal education (Learning and Work Institute, 2018)

The characteristics of those who are classified as 'low-skilled' is invariably a list of those who experience a wide range of barriers in life and difficult and demanding domestic, social, and economic circumstances. They often experience and are harmed by prejudice and discrimination. Often, they are identified legally as vulnerable or protected groups under human rights, equalities, and other social legislation.

Many 'low-skilled' adults may not be 'low-skilled' they may be 'low qualified', which could be addressed by validation of their informal and non-formal learning achievements, allowing them to build on the knowledge and skills they must support their progression in education and/ or employment.

2.3. MEETING THE NEEDS OF LOW-SKILLED ADULTS

Low-skilled adults often have what is termed a "spiky profile". For example, some have low-level numeracy skills but high-level language skills. Some may have relatively high-level numeracy skills with missing outcomes e.g., percentages as changes in their circumstances led to variable education performance and achievements, interruptions and or exclusions from formal education. To "fill the gaps" an adult may wish to participate in adult learning, while their language skills are sufficient to enable them to participate in everyday life and employment.

Many low skilled adults' biographies highlight negative experiences with formal education, which make them reluctant to undertake any formal learning or attempts at certification again as adults, with a resulting lack of formal qualifications. The case may also be that knowledge and skills acquired during formal education will deteriorate if not used.

Low-skilled adults often have knowledge and skills gained through non- formal and informal learning, but they (and others, such as their family members, states, and

employers don't recognise them as valued skills) or adults do not have evidence to show they have them.

For many low-skilled adults, their first step back into learning is by participation in community based informal, non-formal or formal adult learning programmes ranging from interview support and confidence-boosting programmes to ESOL programmes. This approach offers a personalised, non-threatening approach to learning while involving relevant stakeholders.

Validation can be presented to adults as a way to start from their needs and capacities to allow them to progress in education and/or employment through recognition of the skills they have gained in non-formal and informal contexts. To support this, the 2012 EU Council of the European Union (2013) recommended establishing national validation arrangements in all countries by 2018 (CEDEFOP, 2012). However, EU countries still diverge in terms of validation mechanisms they have in place:

Additionally, 'validation systems are often targeting adults who have had a bad experience with formal education and formal assessment methods. This has led them to not complete their secondary education and to not participate in any further formal education. Yet, they have acquired many skills and competences in non-formal and informal learning environments...' (INNOVAL, 2016)

In the Netherlands, The International Women's Centre (IWC) (International Vrouwen Centrum, 2020) aims to address these issues for both Dutch and non-Dutch women. The centre offers courses, activities, training programmes and projects, which allow women to grow and develop in their own way and to identify their personal skills and competencies.

"The women who come to us are usually not Dutch and have very varied levels of education, ranging from illiterate to university graduates. The women usually start on step 1 of the participation ladder, which we work with at the IWC. We developed a test in 2012 in order to determine which step of the ladder someone should start at, called the Tracking System". IWC director, Marlies Pfann

Through various courses and activities, the centre guides women to the next step, using activities ranging from learning to ride a bicycle, intercultural coffee mornings, Dutch conversation practice, sports activities, computer courses, assertiveness training and 1-on-1 language training: they are all focused on learning and discovering skills, and above all, increasing self-confidence.

The model used at IWC is based on the Swiss CH-Q method (a Swiss vocational qualifications programme that has developed tools to document skills). CH-Q follows the steps of the VPL procedure: raising awareness, documentation, presentation, assessment, and certification (Duvekot, 2014).

A VPL training course consists of seven weekly group meetings of 2,5 hours each, where, through self-exploration and reflection, new or potential skills and characteristics are

mirrored to the group, and to partners or possible employers for affirmation. They create a development line and lifeline, as well as a personal and work profile. Intermittent presentations to the group, with feedback, increases self-confidence and pride in their qualities, an ability to recognise opportunities and an awareness of how to use them.

After the 7 sessions, the participants put together a portfolio, in which they can outline their development, experiences, strengths, skills and competencies, as well as their short and long-term goals. After about a month, the group meets again to give a final presentation to one another, as well as the trainer and a counsellor, and they are given a grade. They receive a nationally recognised certificate and are then ready for the next step, which is finding a job (alone or with support).

The action plan for validation and non-formal adult education (EAEA, 2016) seeks to improve the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The main challenges highlighted by AVA are the lack of a strategy to outreach to disadvantaged groups, the difficulty in cooperating with other stakeholders as well as the absence of permeability, which hinders the progression of the individual in his or her life.

Context is everything, Validation can target a range of different sub-groups and age ranges of early leavers and low qualified groups. One point to consider in this respect is the specificities of the different target groups and what this means for the type of validation approach they may benefit from and the most appropriate tools to be used. For example, many early leavers and low qualified groups will have left education and training with at most a lower secondary qualification and may struggle with basic reading and writing, calculation and using digital tools in everyday life. Some younger early school leavers may have complex needs and may require more psychosocial support to help increase self-esteem and/or self-awareness (CEDEFOP, 2020).

2.4. MOTIVATION FOR VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING (VNFIL)

The assessment process may be formal or informal, structured, or unstructured, but it always poses a question, and the answer always leads to action. What form that action takes depends on the learner's goals and aspirations, which may include (SOLAS, 2018):

- Educational goals, e.g., to get a qualification or manage the literacy or numeracy of higher-level FET provision.
- Economic goals, e.g., to find a job or to advance in their present job.
- Personal goals, e.g., to manage literacy and numeracy tasks at home, in family life or to pursue a personal interest.
- Social or community goals e.g., to engage with friends and peers in community activities

The skill of the counsellor includes the ability to learn from the adult what their individual motivation is and in showing that they respect their motivation.

When considering the most suitable form of assessment, the adult's motivation is key. The adult's goal within the context of life, work or community should inform the chosen assessment process and tools.

For example, if the adult identifies the need to improve their basic skills to progress in work, the learning objective could be evidenced by formal qualifications (e.g., level 2 language) or by demonstrating and evidencing the ability to apply their language skills within a work context. For example, the adult could evidence their ability to communicate effectively in work by demonstrating their knowledge of specialist terminology, which could be assessed through alternative assessment approaches e.g., observation or self-assessment, with external accreditation.

It is important that the counsellor communicates to the adult the benefits of validating their non-formal and informal learning achievements, in which assessment plays a crucial part.

Support materials and resources may include paper-based or online documents, images, books, tests, and worksheets. Recording instruments are paper-based or online forms and templates used to record and keep track of the information generated by the assessment methods.

Some adults are attracted to assessment through relatively non-formal, independent mechanisms such as Europass (European Union, 2021), which provides a set of online tools to help people to create a CV and cover letters. It also helps adults find jobs and courses in the EU and allows people to upload, save and share their documents safely.

Others may benefit from enrolling in education and training programmes that will eventually lead to a formal qualification e.g., a basic skills qualification in the UK at entry-level (e.g., Level 1, 2 or 3) through which adults could progress to level eight (i.e., qualifications equivalent to a PhD or DPhil).

The VET toolkit for tackling early leavers provides some important and interesting insights into the importance of offering adult counselling at every stage of the validation process (CEDEFOP, 2020) and illustrates that the counsellor and other adult educators can also be sources of initial and ongoing motivation for adults to start and see through the validation process.

2.4.1. Identifying non-formal and informal learning

To assist the adult to identify their basic skills, which were acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, the counsellor could encourage the adult to speak about their life situations and experiences.

As well as helping the person demonstrate their language skills, (which they may or may not want to be validated), the counsellor can use these methods to provide immediate positive confidence-building feedback which may also help build the adult's confidence in being able to complete the validation process. Biographical methods can be especially

important in the early stages of building the all-important relationship and trust between the adult and counsellor.

Initially, the counsellor may lead on identifying tools to use but as the adult's confidence and engagement with the validation process grows (and without overloading the adult with lots of information, choices, and decisions) the practitioner can gradually help the adult think about and choose which approach and tools they want to use to assess, identify evidence and validate their learning.

2.5. HOW TO PLACE AND KEEP THE ADULT AT THE CENTRE OF THE VALIDATION PROCESS

Placing the adult at the centre of the validation process has huge potential to help them identify, describe, communicate, and document their non-formal and informal learning achievements. For example, the validation process could include Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Validation of Prior Learning (VPL), which "involves assessment of an individual's relevant prior learning (including formal, informal and non-formal learning)".

The World Class Skills publication "Developing Responsive Provision" (QIA's, 2007) includes an initial assessment checklist, which can help counsellors gain the information they need to help adults validate their non-formal and informal learning.

The EAEA state of play report on basic skills development in selected European countries (EAEA, 2021) provides useful insights into the current and developing practices and policy initiatives in basic skills development concerning adults with primary, less than primary, and lower secondary education in selected countries.

In line with the ethical principal of beneficence, participation in validation should also be a positive learning process. Below is an example of how one adult community-learning provider in the UK manages this with learners seeking validation.

Putting learners at the centre of validation

The object of validation is prior learning, but participation in validation could also be seen as a learning process. This is a broad area of activity for tutors as it covers all aspects of producing and distributing information, motivating potential learners', and then offering them individualised advice and guidance on the whole process from identification of learning through to certification.

Guidance offered at appropriate points can make this process efficient and effective for everyone.

Induction

Before starting any programme/course all learners should attend an individual induction meeting, which introduces learners to all of the requirements as well as expectations of the course and support available.

This is a two-way process and gives learners the opportunity to ask questions in a relaxed environment.

During this learners' induction many sensitive issues may arise, and this gives the tutor time to put in place additional learning materials or conditions needed to start the course.

Action plan

If at this stage, the learner wishes to continue on the course, then an action plan will be introduced, giving a timetable for the course tasks and assessments. A learner handbook will also be given which details all the course, guidelines, complaints & appeals procedures as well as current GDPR policy.

Learners will be asked to complete an enrolment form, which also has a section on additional support required within the sessions and assessment.

At the initial appointment, an action plan is drawn up with the learner outlining a timetable for the assessment and what particular tasks will be undertaken each week and under what conditions these will be assessed. This action plan is updated each week with learner's progress and achievements and all actions are agreed together.

After discussing the above documents learners are asked to sign an induction checklist to confirm they have understood the information covered and have received a copy of all necessary documents.

All sessions are held in safe and welcoming settings rather than in formal educational settings and this makes learners feel more comfortable and encourages engagement. A learner centred approach is always encouraged by getting to know each of the learners individually and get a good understanding of what they would like to learn. During Covid 19 this has become more important with both staff and learners having to learn and teach the digital world through a blended learning approach.

Individual needs

Each learner will have individual needs. Some of the special requirements that can be put in place for a learner to complete training may include –

- Providing a scribe
- Giving each learner extra time to complete a task
- Providing a translator
- Allowing video evidence
- Text reading software
- Audio Loop
- Coloured text
- Digital questioning
- Enlarged paper
- Video Diaries
- Learner Journeys

Assessment methods

To choose any assessment methods, the tutor, must be familiar with unit requirements and specifications. In addition, to make sure that assessment methods are inclusive for all learners. This is done through choosing the appropriate assessment methods, developing these and making sure, they meet the unit specification and specified standards.

Prior learning

Learners are asked if they have completed any prior learning, which can be formal, informal, or non-formal. It is important to discuss how this learning relates to any of the modules of the course and if they may have studied a similar one before if they have completed any prior learning, then an assessment will take place to see if this can be recognised as valid and how relevant it may be.

Learning as an additional outcome of validation

Participation in a validation process, as most other experiences could become a learning process. Validation normally requires that the learner is aware of and able to present their knowledge, as well as knowledge of what knowledge that is expected to be presented. Furthermore, the assessor should be aware of these possible learning needs, but also of the variation in learners' knowledge depending on when, where, and how, they have learnt the knowledge contents that is to be validated. Assessor and candidate should strive for mutual understanding, to make the validation process as valid as possible.

3. THE ASSESSMENT OF THE BASIC SKILLS

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Basic skills are general practical skills, which include linguistic, mathematical and digital competence. A certain level of basic skills is essential for successful participation in all aspects of society, active participation in the community, integration into social life, employment, etc. The digital revolution has changed the importance of basic skills, they have become even more important as the flow of information has increased, and new forms of reading and writing have emerged.

The consequences of underdeveloped basic skills are a higher rate of unemployment, risk of poverty, illness, and even early death.

Adults with low basic skills are individuals aged 25-64 with underdeveloped literacy, numeracy, and digital competences. By low proficiency, we mean scoring Level 1 and below on the literacy and/or numeracy dimensions of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC). In other words, low skilled adults are persons who at most can perform simple reading tasks and understand brief texts on familiar topics, and/or are able to do simple math, such as counting, sorting, and basic arithmetic operations and understand simple percentages (EAEA, 2018).

We must not forget, however, that many adults with low basic skills are not always low-skilled, they may have low language, math, and digital skills, but often have a wide range of other valuable skills.

Research shows that gender, age, parental education and background, migrant background, and income play an important role in the development of individual skills. Women are more likely to have low basic skills.

Individuals in the 25-34 age group have the most developed basic skills. Skills decline over the years, especially if individuals do not use them. The PIAAC survey points out that the gap in literacy between the generations is widening. Older adults (age 55 to 64) are more likely to have low basic skills, because they are close to retirement, and they do not feel the need to participate in education (OECD, 2019).

Parents' education plays an important role in their children's level of competence. Adults with low basic skills are more likely to come from families where both parents are low-skilled. The migration background is strongly related to the level of basic skills. Migrants usually have lower basic skills. Hourly wage is strongly associated with level of basic skills. Lower wage means lower basic skills.

According to the PIAAC research on the basic skills of adults, around seventy million Europeans have low levels of skills.

Which means that every fifth European's literacy and every fourth European's numeracy skills are at level 1 or lower. Literacy is one of the most important skills but one out of

five of adults reaches at most level 1 (16% are at level 1 and 4% are under level 1). A similar situation is with the proficiency in numeracies, as 24% of adults have low level of numeracy skills (17% have reached level 1 and 7% are below that level). One in four adult's low levels of problem-solving skills, 14% of adults can only solve very simple tasks in digital environment and in addition 13% of adults have very basic to no computer knowledge or experience.

On average, as many as 20% of adults in the EU have very poor basic skills. Which means that they are able only to complete tasks that involve very few steps, process a limited amount of information, and perform basic cognitive operations. The level and distribution of skills depends on the country, and there are differences within countries and especially between generations.

Adults with a lower level of basic skills are less likely to participate in lifelong learning compared to highly skilled adults. Highly skilled adults are on average, five times more likely to participate in education and learning activities. Which means they are progressing and developing through education, low-skilled adults are often trapped in a low skills trap, because they do not participate in education. Therefore, they have little chance and opportunity to keep up with innovations and changes in the world. They find it more difficult to meet the expectations of society and the labour market. In addition, their working environment usually do not stimulate learning and employers are less likely to invest in the training of low educated adults.

Research shows there is a serious skills gap in labour force. Adults with low-level basic skills are more likely to lose their jobs and risk long-term unemployment. One in four unemployed adults has low basic skills, the employment rate is much higher among those with developed basic skills (65% of level 2, 72% of level 3 and 78% of level 4-5 are employed). The difference is even more pronounced in numeracy (only 52% of low skilled adults are employed) (European Commission, 2013).

Education and skills are part of the solution to labour market challenges as they increase employability. A skilled workforce is more productive and employable, bringing innovation and competitiveness. This is the reason why education and investment in skills have been main goals of Europe's strategy (Europe 2020) to overcome the crisis and to boost economic growth and jobs (European Commission, 2013).

Adults with low basic skills work mainly in low-tech, manufacturing, construction, transportation, and storage services. They find themselves in sectors, which typically offer manual, routine work with limited learning opportunities. Higher-skilled adults typically work in occupations that offer much more opportunities for training and learning. Lower skilled adults are more likely to work in micro and small enterprises, which due to financial and organisational capacities, provide less education and training than larger enterprises. They frequently find themselves trapped in low-level and low-paid positions, lacking opportunities for development.

Adults with lower basic skills face several barriers that prevent them from participating in education. In most OECD countries, more than 50% of low skilled adults are not interested in education. Their motivation to participate in organised learning is usually very low. For many low skilled adults, lack of skills is a source of embarrassment, a weakness they must hide from others, and they are ashamed of it. Self-doubt can be a major educational barrier.

They may be willing to overcome existing barriers to education if they feel the time and financial investment is worth it. Literacy, numeracy, and digital competence are skills that cannot be developed over night; they require a lot of patience, persistence, and the constant renewal of motivation as well as practical application and transfer into living and working situations.

Adults have many opportunities for education in most OECD countries. They can choose from many different learning options (from programmes to acquire formal basic, general and vocational education to certified courses to gain specific skills, etc.). Several providers offer education and learning opportunities. The rich educational offers often confuse adults, and it is challenging to navigate through learning options, especially for low-skilled adults. Low-skilled adults need more support in identifying their needs and understanding which educational or training programme is right for them. They need additional support and advice to overcome barriers to education (lack of time, money, family commitments, distance, but also knowledge and skills to keep up with learning, etc.) (EPALE, 2020).

Professional and holistic guidance and advice are the most successful tools for improving opportunities for adults to continue and successfully complete their education and learning adult skills. However, counselling and guidance services specifically targeted at low-skilled adults are rare. The counsellor should help adults navigate through the educational process and training. Show them development opportunities and motivate them. This requires a skilled counsellor, who has sufficient knowledge, resources, and time to assist each individual and tailor their personal development plan.

It is essential to take steps to help improve adult's basic skills and literacy across Europe. Many see adult education as the key to more knowledge, skills, competences, and social and civic participation in Europe. Education has the potential to increase democracy, inclusion, health, and wellbeing.

Under the Erasmus + program, the skillUPgame project is underway, which addresses the issue of low skilled adults. The project aims to improve the linguistic, numeracy and digital skills of low-skilled adults. The focus is on adult educators who learn how to use gamification in education. The project involves partners from Slovenia, Lithuania, Ireland and Spain (EPALE, 2020).

Engaging low-skilled adults in learning is key for ensuring their social and economic inclusion. Experience shows that investing in the development of basic skills has many positive effects. Adults who develop basic skills become more independent, self-

confident; their physical and mental condition can improve. Their relationship with the community can be improved, as they can better interpret experiences and events. In addition, they can develop stronger and more focused bonds with family members. By developing the basic skills, they increase flexibility and productivity in the workplace and have more opportunities to keep their job and to increase their salary (EPALE, 2019).

3.2. FACTORS CHARACTERISING THE COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT

Standards-based competence assessment offers a way to identify skills and evaluate them fairly. It shows what learners can do in relation to broad descriptions, supported by examples of expected achievement. The descriptions are broader than criteria. The desired results that are assessed are also called “standards”. Each standard has several components that learner must combine to achieve the standard (Gradecam, 2020)

Standards-based assessment depends on a set of pre-defined statements outlining different standards of achievement. It is performed when you assess competencies based on standards, rather than other factors. It compares each learners’ performance to standards and not to the performance of other learners.

The purpose of standards-based assessment is to link evidence of learning with learning outcomes (standards). Once the standards are clear and explicit, it is easier to assess and give meaningful feedback to the learner about their progress. One of the biggest pitfalls in standards-based assessment is when the skills list is filled with jargon or when the skills list seems endless.

When performing standards-based assessment it is important to identify a key factor knowledge, essential content, and concepts. It takes time to develop standards for all assessment tasks.

Criterion-referenced competence assessment is designed to measure learner performance against a set of predetermined criteria with reference to benchmarks of expected performance. It measures the level of an individual’s learning. Criterion-referenced assessment shows what learners can or cannot do in relation to a specific list of tasks or skills. The test determines whether a learner exceeds, meets, or does not meet criteria. Criterion-referenced tests may be used to make important decisions about a learner or to measure the academic achievement of an individual learner, identify learning problems, or inform about adjustments.

Criterion-referenced tests can be used to determine whether learners have learned expected knowledge and skills if they have learning gaps or academic deficits. To evaluate the effectiveness of a course, academic program, or learning experience. To evaluate the effectiveness of teachers. To measure progress toward the learning goals and objectives. To determine if a learner or teacher is qualified to receive a licence or certificate (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014).

The tests are better suited to measuring learning progress and are fairer to learners than norm-referenced tests. They apply the same learning standards to all students.

Evidence-based competence assessment is judgement about competence on the recognising, assessing, and accreditation of prior achievement and learning through documents (portfolio, etc.). The assessment requires collecting and managing multiple types of evidence from multiple contexts and sources to document competence and promote reflective skills. The counsellor uses professional judgement to form a conclusion about a specific competence. Counsellor must fully understand the expected standards of performance (Watson, 1994).

Evidence can be obtained by learner self-assessment, observation by the counsellor, interviews by the counsellor with other actors (peers, supervisors, etc.) and analysis by the counsellor of relevant documentation. This approach is usually used to assess higher levels of competence. Agencies that provide alternative routes for accreditation usually use evidence-based assessment

Planned and scheduled competence assessment is assessment that is organised and planned. The counsellor plans a schedule for when the assessment will be conducted and how long it will take, what tools will be used to assess, etc. (SAMA, 2021).

Individual and personalised competence assessment is assessment that is tailored to the individual learner. Personalised assessment is flexible, which means that questions are selected based on the answers to previous questions. It attends to the learner's prior learning and readiness for new learning. It also seeks to understand the person of the learner (interests, aspirations, etc.). Individual competency assessment shows learners' current strengths and weaknesses and provides a roadmap for development. Learners had better understand what they can do, what they need to work on, and what next steps they need to take (Nursing and Midwifery Board Harp, 2015).

3.3. WHAT IS THE BASIC SKILLS ASSESSMENT?

Assessment of an individual's learning outcomes is the third phase of the validation process of non-formal and informal learning. An individual's learning outcomes are compared against specific reference points and/or standards. Assessment is crucial to the overall credibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2018).

This phase depends on the standard or reference point used in the validation process. The shift to learning-outcomes-based standards is generally considered to benefit validation. Focusing on what a learner knows, understands, and can do, a learning-outcomes based assessment is not obliged to consider input-factors (such as duration or location of learning) (CEDEFOP, 2015).

A skills assessment is an evaluation of an individual's ability to perform a specific skill or set of skills. Usually, it is an evaluation of skills specific to a job or role (CEDEFOP, 2014).

In Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2012) it is written “a skills audit means a process aimed at identifying and analysing the knowledge, skills and competences of an individual, including his or her aptitudes and motivations in order to define a career project and/or plan a professional reorientation or training project; the aim of a skills audit is to help the individual analyse his/her career background, to self-assess his/her position in the labour environment and to plan a career pathway, or in some cases to prepare for the validation of non-formal or informal learning outcomes”.

From the beginning of the assessment stage adults must understand the requirements and standards expected. They must ensure that the learning they have identified is properly sampled, well documented, organised, and ready for assessment. Adults also need to know the assessment and validation procedures and the possible outcomes. For low-educated and low-skilled adults, however, the counsellor is the one who supports them in the validation process, helps them all the time and all the way, and guides them to their goals (UNESCO, 2015).

In European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2009), it is stated that the methods used for validation of non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools used in assessing formal learning. When used for validation, tools must be adopted, combined, and applied in a way, which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2019).

Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose (CEDEFOP, 2020).

The following criteria need to be considered when the learning to be assessed (CEDEFOP, 2009):

- breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed.
- depth of learning required.
- how current or recent are the knowledge, skills and competence.
- sufficiency of information for a counsellor to make a judgement.
- authenticity of the evidence being the adult’s own learning out-comes.

After we determine the basis of learning, it is possible to examine the appropriateness for the purpose of different assessment tools. The following criteria need to be considered for each potentially useful assessment tool (CEDEFOP, 2009):

- validity: the tool must measure what it is intended to measure.
- reliability: the extent to which identical results would be achieved every time a candidate is assessed under the same conditions.
- fairness: the extent to which an assessment decision is free from bias (context dependency, culture and counsellor bias).
- cognitive range: does the tool enable the counsellor to judge the breadth and depth of the candidate’s learning.

- appropriateness for the purpose of the assessment: ensuring the purpose of the assessment tool matches the use for which it is intended.

3.4. BASIC SKILLS: LITERACY, NUMERACY AND DIGITAL SKILLS

According to Recommendation of the Council of the European Union valid from mid-2018 (Council of the European Union, 2018) onwards these are the eight key competences:

- Literacy competence
- Multilingual competence
- Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology, and engineering
- Digital competence
- Personal, social, and learning to learn competence
- Citizenship competence
- Entrepreneurship competence
- Cultural awareness and expression competence

In the GLAS project, we are dealing with the validation process of literacy, numeracy, and digital competences, so we will take a closer look at the content of these competences.

Literacy competence: Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, express, create, and interpret concepts, feelings, facts, and opinions in both oral and written forms, using visual, sound/audio, and digital materials across disciplines and contexts. It implies the ability to communicate and connect effectively with others, in an appropriate and creative way (Council of the European Union, 2018).

Mathematical competence: Mathematical competence is the ability to develop and apply mathematical thinking and insight to solve a range of problems in everyday situations. Building on a sound mastery of numeracy, the emphasis is on process and activity, as well as knowledge. Mathematical competence involves, to different degrees, the ability and willingness to use mathematical modes of thought and presentation (formulas, models, constructs, graphs, charts) (Council of the European Union, 2018).

Digital competence: Digital competence involves the confident, critical, and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking (Council of the European Union, 2018).

Assessment of non-formal and informal learning in the GLAS project covers the areas of key competencies of language, mathematical and digital literacy, which are especially

important for inclusion in education and career development, as well as for working in a modern work and wider social environment.

3.5. TASKS OF COUNSELLOR IN THE BASIC SKILLS ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

The role of a counsellor is to seek, review and check evidence of an individual's learning, in our case, digital, language and numeracy literacy, and judge what meets specific standards. The counsellor must be familiar with standards and the potentially useful assessment methods for referencing evidence against standards (Vilič Klenovšek, et al., 2013).

One can distinguish between several types of standards (CEDEFOP, 2014):

- competence standard refers to knowledge, skills and/or competences linked to the practice of a job.
- educational standard refers to statements of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements as well as resources required to meet learning objectives.
- occupational standard refers to the statements of the activities and tasks related to a specific job and to its practice.
- assessment standard refers to statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed and the methodology used.
- validation standard refers to statements of level of achievement to be reached by the person assessed, and the methodology used.
- certification standard refers to statements of the rules applicable for obtaining a certificate or diploma as well as the rights conferred.

However, if the counsellor is not an expert for a certain field of assessment, an external competent expert needs to be involved in the validation process. In this case, the counsellor is responsible for carrying out the procedure of the validation process and the expert for assessing the learning outcomes in its expert` area. The assessment phase can conclude with a certificate or proof, but more important, for low-educated and low-skilled adults can conclude with a written report or providing feedback about the assessed knowledge, skills, and competences, that also includes guidelines for further learning. Only with the help of the assessment of the development of competencies, we can provide adults with constructive feedback on where they are currently and how they can upgrade their knowledge and skills or close any gaps (Alja Gladek, 2021).

In the assessment phase, the counsellor can proceed from the evidence brought by the adult in the documentation phase, or the counsellor himself (or an expert in a particular field of expertise) can assess the knowledge identified in this phase. In both cases, the identification and documentation phases are crucial for a proper assessment. The more accurate and in-depth the assessment of learning activities and achievements is in the introductory phase, the more comprehensive the documentation of everything found will be, and this enables a comprehensive assessment of the adequacy of documented

knowledge. In this phase, the adequacy of the knowledge recorded in the evidence is compared with the required knowledge in a particular field. However, the requirements depend on the purpose for which the validation process is carried out. In the event that there is no evidence for the identified knowledge, the consultant assesses them using various credible methods, tools, and instruments (Alja Gladek, 2021).

When assessing the knowledge of adults, it is recommended to combine different methods and tools to obtain as much information as possible about the competence of an adult. In addition, the use of various methods and tools makes it easier for us to approach an adult and in this way enable him to demonstrate his acquired knowledge in various ways (Alja Gladek, 2021). Even methods and tools already used in the identification and documentation phases of non-formal and informal learning can be used in the assessment phase.

Key knowledge and skills of counsellors are (CEDEFOP, 2015):

- Be familiar with the validation process (validity and reliability).
- Have experience in the specific field of work.
- Have no personal interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest).
- Be familiar with different assessment methodologies.
- Be able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates.
- Be committed to provide feedback on the match between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (via support systems).
- Be trained in assessment and validation processes and knowledgeable about quality assurance mechanisms.
- Operate according to a code of conduct.

4. THE PROCESS OF VALIDATION OF COMPETENCIES

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Digitalization, technological changes, ageing of the population and social inclusion are changing society. In the face of these situations, it is important to ensure that adults can update themselves and acquire new skills to thrive in their lives and careers. This is now even more relevant as we find ourselves in a global pandemic situation with its impact on many areas of society.

One of the objectives pursued by the European Union is to ensure that people are competent and have the skills to do so. Citizens must develop their competencies from formal education to the knowledge they have acquired through learning in non-formal and informal contexts. Adults must be able to demonstrate that they have learned to use this learning in their careers. Establishing processes to identify, document and evaluate all forms of learning is useful to enable career progression and to improve citizenship education and training.

Due to the increasing relevance of learning outside formal education, the Council of the European Union has adopted a set of common European principles for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning (Council of European Union, 2012). Since 2004, European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning principles have been used in countries for development at the national level. In 2016, the European Commission created a new "Skills Agenda for Europe: working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness" with the intention of improving the quality and relevance of skills training, making professional competences and qualifications more visible, and improving skills intelligence and information for career enhancement. In the same year, the Skills Enhancement Pathways initiative (CEDEFOP, 2020) was created as a process through which the low-skilled adult can move forward to improve basic skill levels in literacy, numeracy, and digital skills (ICT). Different key areas have been established for the improvement of the skills of these people. Importance is given to skills assessment, as a process that facilitates opportunities for advancement, transition to employment and updating of knowledge and technical developments. The process of validation and recognition of skills and competencies acquire relevance as strategies that increase the visibility and value of the learning that has been acquired.

In the European Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (Council of the European Union, 2018), reference is also made to the competences that have been obtained by individuals to be recognized in full or partial qualification. This process can help individuals improve their competencies and evolving labour market requirements.

Adults should have opportunities to update and acquire new skills to cope with uncertain situations and to prosper in their lives and careers, especially for those with less education. This chapter defines what the validation process consists of, its phases, the role, and competencies that the counsellor must have, the contexts in which this process can be developed and the methods and tools to be used by the counsellor in the validation process.

4.2. THE VALIDATION PROCESS

The process of validation of learning outcomes refers to the knowledge, skills and competencies that have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning. This process can have an important role to improve employability and mobility, as well as in increasing motivation for lifelong learning, especially for people with socio-economic problems or low skills.

The validation process is understood as a process of confirmation by an authorized body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard. It enables individuals to have knowledge, skills and competencies that have been acquired through validated non-formal and informal learning, including through open educational resources, and/or to obtain a full or partial qualification based on validated non-formal and informal learning experiences (Council of the European Union, 2012).

The purpose of validation is to generate evidence of learning that can be exchanged for future learning or work. The competence validation process aims to make people's learning visible. This learning usually takes place outside formal education (at home, in the workplace or in leisure activities) and is often ignored. Validation consists of assigning a value to people and learning, regardless of the context in which it took place. This process helps the individual to exchange non-formal and informal learning outcomes for future learning or employment opportunities. Validation should be a process that builds trust, by attesting to what reliability, validity and quality assurance requirements have been met.

4.3. THE PHASES OF VALIDATION PROCESS

The validation process is often carried out within the educational environment, but institutions and stakeholders outside the educational environment also develop this.

To unify the characteristics and steps to be followed in the validation process, the Council of the European Union has developed the 2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which identifies the four phases that make up the validation process: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification (Council of European Union, 2012).

These phases are combined and balanced in different ways, depending on the specific purpose of the validation process. In the case of obtaining a formal qualification, the strength and credibility of the assessment phase is crucial. On the other hand, if you want to validate a volunteer experience, the emphasis will be more on the identification and documentation part and less on the formal assessment and accreditation part. All four phases are likely to be present in the validation.

The purpose of the validation process, as mentioned above, is to create evidence that reflects learning that has been acquired by the individual and can be used in future learning or employment. It is therefore necessary that the identification, documentation, and assessment phases refer to benchmarks or accepted standards. When you want to obtain a formal qualification, the reference standards that have been used by the system or institution will determine the requirements of the validation process. In the case of companies, internal or less formal benchmarks are often used. The transfer or exchange of results of the validation process depends on whether the resulting document, portfolio of competencies or certificates are seen as reliable by stakeholders and external interested persons, depending in turn on how the four phases have been designed and developed (CEDEFOP, 2015).

4.3.1. Identification

The validation process begins with the identification of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired in non-formal and informal settings. The individual becomes increasingly aware of what the adult has achieved and what the adult has learned. This phase is crucial, learning outcomes differ from person to person, as they are acquired in different contexts. It also involves the discovery of their capabilities and their awareness

of them, constituting valuable results in the validation process. The identification of non-formal and informal learning is a major methodological challenge. Identification methods and approaches must be open to the totality of knowledge, skills, and competencies.

In some countries, there are ICT tools that allow self-assessment. Although these tools can reach more people and are cheaper, they may not be able to identify and assess the specific combination of skills and competencies acquired by the individual. Therefore, it is necessary to be accompanied by professionals who are actively involved to have direct communication with the person and to be able to guide them towards the most appropriate tools for their situation. The use of dialogue through interviews and other methods is more valuable for the candidate.

The adult in that stage should be aware of the costs and benefits of participating in a validation process from the perspective of continuing their education and training.

4.3.2. Documentation

The documentation phase follows the identification phase. It consists of providing evidence of the learning outcomes that have been acquired. This can be done by means of a portfolio of competencies in which the person's curriculum vitae and career path are compiled, together with the documents or evidence accrediting the learning outcomes. The validation process should be open to different documents, from written documents to work samples and practical demonstrations. These documents must contain sufficient information on the learning outcomes acquired, a simple list of work performed is not sufficient.

Regarding the provision of documents, it is necessary to work in a coordinated manner at national and European level. If assessment professionals use different documents, depending on the location, it will be difficult for the candidate to present and obtain acceptance of his/her acquired competences and skills. In response to this problem, Europass provides common formats for the presentation of learning experiences to promote transferability, better understanding of results and comparability, as it promotes the way knowledge, skills and competences are expressed in different economic sectors and education and training qualifications.

This phase, in some countries, is grouped with the identification phase, as part of the collection of evidence of the learning outcomes acquired by the candidate to create the portfolio with the necessary material for the counsellor.

4.3.3. Assessment

The assessment is the phase in which the learning results acquired by the adult are compared with specific benchmarks or standards. This evidence may be composed of written and documentary evidence, but also of evidence expressed by other means. The performance of the assessment is essential to give credibility to the learning validation process. Sometimes, the certificates generated from the validation process are

considered lower than those obtained after passing traditional courses and programs are. To avoid this perception, the tools and processes used in the evaluation phase should be presented as transparently as possible. It is important to have mechanisms in place to ensure the quality of the assessment to provide more confidence in the process.

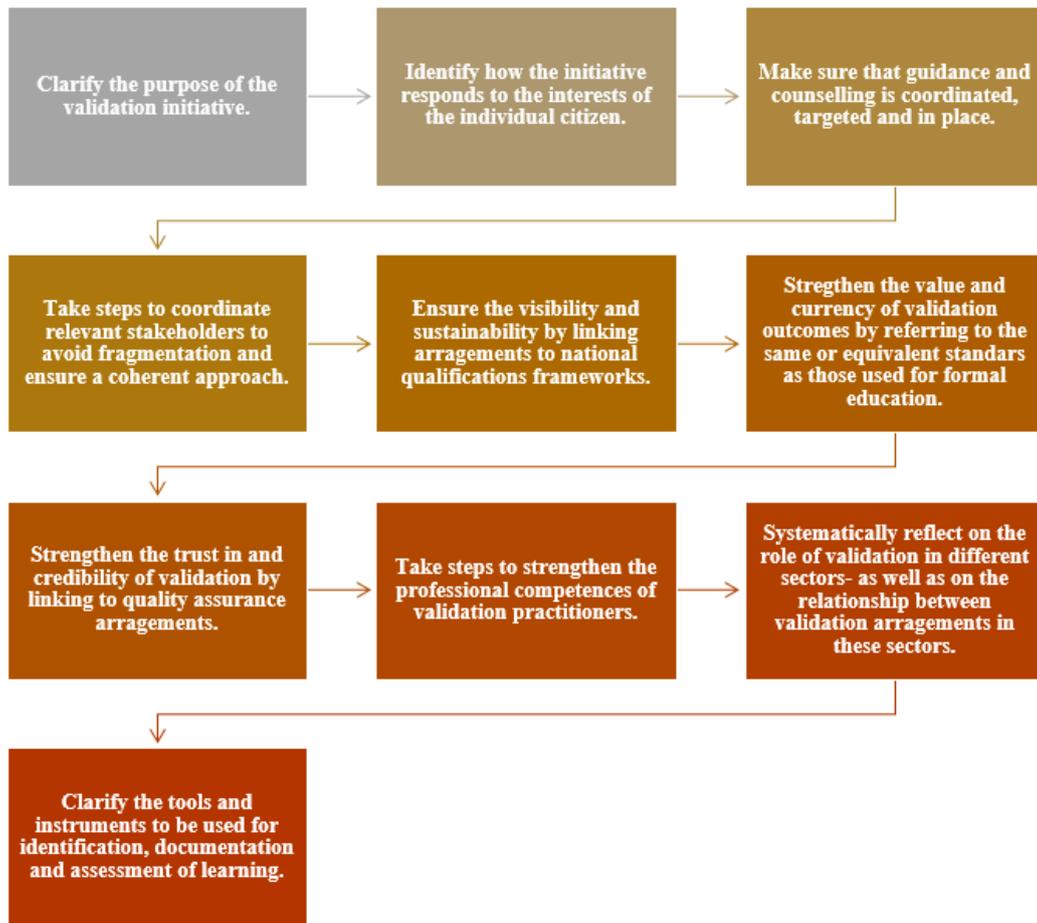
This phase depends on the standards or benchmarks used. It is believed that contrasting the evidence with the reference standards benefits the validation process. Assessment based on learning outcomes focuses on what the individual knows, understands, and can do, and facilitates reflection and respect for individual variations in learning paths. Many of the tools used in this process are like those used in formal training processes. Since the validation process makes use of individual experiences, the tools used for evaluation must be designed to capture and assess the specific learning of each individual and the context in which that learning process has taken place. The difference between these tools and those used in formal education is that they are applied to large cohorts of the population and give less priority to the needs of each subgroup. To identify the individual specificity of learning outcomes it is necessary to use a variety of tools, such as the use of written tests and practical tests. Practical demonstrations, simulations or the collection of past practical evidence will often be necessary.

4.3.4. Certification

Certification is the last stage of the competency validation process, in which a final assessment is made of the learning that has been identified, documented, and assessed. Certification can take various forms, but the most common is the awarding of a formal qualification. In the business or work environment, certification can also be the issue of a license that allows the adult to perform specific tasks. The validation process, at the certification stage, requires a summative assessment that formally confirms the achievement of learning outcomes against specific standards. It is necessary that this certification process be developed by a credible entity. The value of a certificate issued in a validation process depends on the legitimacy of the issuing body. When the validation process is based on summative methods of non-formal and informal learning, there must be a strong connection with national qualification systems. In some countries, it has been decided to issue specific certificates for non-formal and informal learning. This alternative may be a solution for some contexts, but there is a risk of creating multi-category certificates where the certificates issued from the validation process would be worse. The establishment of the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning as another alternative for obtaining a diploma gives a legal right to the validation process. This right is already recognized in some countries and guarantees access to the qualification without specifying the learning process used to achieve it.

The following image shows how the different stages described above are connected and lead to the development of the validation process (CEDEFOP, 2015):

Illustration 1 Development and application of validation



4.4. PRINCIPLES OF VALIDATION PROCESS

Based on the conclusions published in CEDEFOP (CEDEFOP, 2015), the principles and guidelines for validation processes are as follows:

- The adult is at the centre of the validation: it is necessary that all adults have access to this process and show their involvement and motivation.
- Validation must be voluntary: the adult voluntarily participates in the process.
- The privacy of adults must be respected: the data protection law must be complied with. Neither the information provided by the adult, nor the information of the process or the results should be known by a third party.
- Equality in access and treatment: all adults must have access, being the role of the certifying organization transparency in the information and details of the process. The adult should be treated fairly, being given the information, requirements, necessary resources, and opportunities to participate in this process before starting.

- Stakeholder involvement in the process: different stakeholders, at all levels, shall be part of the process when a validation system is established.
- The validation process, procedures and criteria must be fair, transparent, and supported by quality criteria: when building a validation process, a quality assurance system must be defined, covering the criteria and procedures to ensure quality. These procedures should include clear responsibilities for quality assurance, defined quality assurance mechanisms, evaluation and feedback structures, review of processes and procedures, continuous learning and training for the person involved, and high transparency for all stakeholders about the quality assurance model and the measures taken. Quality assurance of the system is a relevant task for all stakeholders. For the quality assurance of validation practices, CEDEFOP proposes the following quality indicators:
 - Trust
 - Validity
 - Security and confidentiality
 - Standards/benchmarks to measure competences
 - Sustainability
 - Visibility and transparency
 - Fitness for purpose
 - Cost effectiveness
- Validation systems must respect interest and participation: stakeholders must be involved because of their interest for the validation process to be successful.
- The validation process must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest: adult's participation, as mentioned above, is voluntary and the organization's involvement in the validation processes must be independent and neutral.
- Counsellors must be competent to carry out the process: professionals are responsible for seeking and reviewing evidence of an individual's learning and judging those specific standards are met. They should be familiar with the standards and useful assessment methods that can be used to reference evidence against the standards in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

4.5. REQUIREMENT TO DEVELOP A VALIDATION PROCESS

When a process of accreditation of professional competences is mentioned, reference is also made to other implicit elements such as material and economic resources, professionals, and centres responsible for its development that have an organizational and methodological structure for it.

To accredit professional competencies, the following requirements are necessary (Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021):

- To have general and specific standards of the scenario being considered. Evaluating competencies implies assessing with reference to standards, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

- To have professionals in charge of assessment and evaluation who have a defined, qualified, and technically qualified profile for the performance of these functions and who, at the same time, have technical rigor.
- To have the necessary material resources for the development of competency assessment:
 - infrastructure or facilities where the different phases of the procedure can be carried out, which may be educational centres, companies, or entities with which an agreement has been signed for this purpose.
 - equipment and materials to carry out the assessment: procedure manual, self-assessment questionnaires for the training units and evidence guides for the competency units.
 - economic resources to carry out the procedure.
 - delimit the rules to be followed in the process, which must be known by the interested parties.

4.6. QUALITY IN THE COMPETENCY VALIDATION PROCESS

The competency validation process must ensure quality by applying transparency measures in accordance with existing quality assurance frameworks in support of reliable, valid, and credible validation methods and tools, as outline in the 2012 EU Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2012).

In addition to the guidelines provided by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (CEDEFOP), there is the ISO 17024 standard as an additional source of information about the requirements that organizations must have in the process of certification of persons. Certification of persons is understood as the way to ensure that the person to whom the certification is granted complies with the requirements of the certification scheme. Confidence in the certification process is achieved through globally accurate assessment (Santarcangelo & Miglionico, 2019).

In addition to the guidelines provided by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (CEDEFOP), there is the ISO 17024 standard as an additional source of information about the requirements that organizations must meet in the process of certifying people. Certification of persons is understood as the way to ensure that the adult to whom the certification is granted complies with the requirements of the certification scheme. Confidence in the certification process is achieved through a globally accepted assessment (Santarcangelo & Miglionico, 2019).

This standard provides clear information on how the certification process should be carried out, considering the following points:

- Accreditation bodies must be independent and impartial.
- A committee elected by the certification body must develop the certification scheme.

- A committee is responsible for the development and maintenance of the certification scheme.
- The interests of all parties must be respected.
- The certification body must define the methodology used for the evaluation of competencies.
- The certification body must evaluate the methods of evaluation of candidate examinations.
- The examinations must be clear, valid, and secure.
- The methodology and procedures used to collect information must be defined.

4.7. CONTEXT OF VALIDATION

Taking as a reference the 2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, different contexts of validation and the challenges that arise in each of them are addressed (CEDEFOP, 2015).

4.7.1. Validation in education and training

The field of education and training is the main promoter of the validation of non-formal and informal learning and often plays a promotional and coordinating role. Validation in this field is important for adults and as support for lifelong learning. People between 25 and 45 years old are the main profile of candidates in the validation process, indicating the importance for the transition from employment to education and vice versa. The Bologna Process has provided an impetus for the creation of methods and possibilities for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Universities have used this process to grant exemption from parts of the curriculum and, rarely, to grant full qualifications. Some of the validation processes that are developed are more focused on the recognition of prior education and, to a lesser extent, with learning that has been acquired outside formal institutions.

One difficulty that hinders the execution of this process is that few educational programs are described in terms of learning outcomes. Its development also depends on existing information, legal rights and the availability of adequate measures and services. It is often linked to adult education to support people who lack formal qualifications. The validation process should be designed considering the needs and interests of the individual, not only those of the education system and institutions involved.

Within an area we can find open educational resources (OER), which are having a great expansion of online learning opportunities, especially promoted by higher education institutions. OER are defined as digitized materials that are freely and openly offered to educators, students, and self-directed learners for use and reuse for teaching, learning and research purposes. They consist of learning content, tools for designing, using, and distributing content and application resources. They can be complete courses, course modules, curricula, readings, exercises, quizzes, class activities and many more digital contents. They are considered as complements to traditional education and training programs due to their wide access and flexibility to follow the pace of learning. In this training, it is important to properly document and assess learning outcomes and to

consider them in current validation practices. It is therefore necessary that the learning achieved through its development be described in learning outcomes.

4.7.2. Evaluation in companies

The process of validating competencies within companies has benefits such as improving employee motivation and interest, reducing the time to complete a qualification, generating ideas and changes in the workplace, improving employee retention, and reducing costs.

Activities in this area are linked to recruitment and personal development, increasing the visibility of prior learning. For the employee, in this case the adult, the experience they gain serves to add value to their learning experiences. The challenge lies in whether it is possible to present the results of internal company mechanisms in a format that can be used outside the company. Finding a solution would have many benefits for the development of competency validation and assessment, with the collaboration of companies.

4.7.3. Audit of competencies and labour market

The most disadvantaged adults, who are unemployed or potentially unemployable, can benefit from the validation process and increase their participation in lifelong learning and their access to the labour market.

This process helps adults to reflect on their skills, develop their career and improve their employability. It provides people with the means to make their skills and competencies visible and to map their training needs and match them to the needs of the labour market.

In some countries there is a process called Competency Balancing, where the objectives mentioned above are pursued. Competency audits use different tools and methods, but do not require a combination of dialogue with standardized assessments. These audits are developed at different levels. One possibility would be to create a validation tool for adults who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment, to use a more decentralized approach or to rely on methods that are developed in companies. Given the important motivational effect of skills audits, the way in which self-assessment and personal assessment are combined will have an impact on the effect of these activities on the employability of those concerned.

4.7.4. Validation in volunteering

The voluntary work of organisations involved in adult and lifelong learning plays an important role in promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In this context, a distinction must be made between identification and documentation on the one hand and assessment and certification on the other. Learning experiences should be assessed as such and not follow the standards of formal education. In this third sector, validation may include the recognition of social and civic competencies,

interpersonal and life skills that have been acquired in specific activities within the non-formal and informal context.

Some authors emphasise the importance of validating the experiences acquired through volunteering to progress in training and employment. There are organisations that act as training centres with their own certificates. In these cases, the public authorities have assessed the training in terms of learning outcomes. The adult then is awarded the official state qualification by means of a certificate of the approved training.

4.8. ROLES OF THE PROFESSIONALS INVOLVED IN THE VALIDATION PROCESS

Within the learning validation process, there are three different profiles of professionals involved in the different phases: counsellor, assessor, and other practitioners involved in validation process. Each of these roles is associated with different functions (CEDEFOP, 2015):

4.8.1. Counsellor

The competency validation process is successful, largely, because of the professional who interacts directly with the adult. These people oversee providing information, advice, counselling and carrying out the assessment. They also act as external observers of the process or as managers of the assessment process itself and may even accompany in other functions less linked to the validation process. In addition to the technical skills required by the process, it is necessary that they possess social skills. These social and intercultural skills will allow them to reach the adults and generate the trust that the process requires for its success. These people must be sufficiently trained to guide people and be able to refer adults to educational or professional paths.

The validation process involves the guidance and counselling of the adult, which is the task of the counsellors. The process begins with a selection of the participants, taking as a reference tests to identify their abilities, aptitudes, attitudes and work experience, the inclusion of adults to the process, the support during the evaluation process and the continuous guidance after the evaluation decision. It is necessary for the counsellor to know the needs of the adult and take this as a basis for providing more individualized support for decisions, information, solutions, and suggestions, following the adult-centred approach. It is essential that the counsellors ensure the continuity of the adult in the different stages of the validation process.

To perform these functions, it is necessary for the counsellor to understand the validation context. If a formal qualification is sought, the counsellor must be aware of the relevant standards and advise on the adequacy of the evidence being presented. The counsellor should assist the adult in preparing for the assessment by providing information about the process, how to present evidence of learning and respond to questions, and expectations regarding behaviour and about the possible outcomes of

the process. Counsellors must have the following skills and knowledge to perform their duties (CEDEFOP, 2015):

- Thorough knowledge of the validation process.
- Thorough knowledge of the educational system.
- Ability to express learning experiences in learning outcomes that correspond to existing standards.
- Knowledge of the labour market.
- List of contacts (experts) to answer specific technical questions (social partners and other industry experts).

4.8.2. Assessor

The counsellor is responsible for finding, examining, and checking the adult’s evidence of learning and assessing the fit of the evidence to specific standards. The professional must know the standards and assessment methods useful for correlating with the corresponding evidence. They should be recognised in their field, bringing confidence and credibility to the assessment. This process is most valuable when the industry expert uses an assessment tool or judges the subsequent results. The person in charge of the evaluation does not have to have any ties to the adult, nor to his or her work or life. The credibility of the process depends on the credibility of the counsellor. Their knowledge and experience are key elements in the quality assurance of validation projects. To be an evaluator, a certain number of years of experience in the field is required, approximately 5 years. In this case, they may be retirees, senior managers, and experts representing the industry, social partners, or professors in the field with direct experience. Training in the validation process, knowledge of assessment methodologies and approaches, and interpersonal skills for good communication and attitude to help adults validate their competencies are also required. Networks of counsellor should be created to ensure professional development and the development of consistent practices (CEDEFOP, 2015).

- Be familiar with the validation process (validity and reliability).
- Have experience in the specific field of work.
- Have no personal interest in the validation results (to ensure impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest).
- Be familiar with different evaluation methodologies.
- Be able to inspire confidence and create a psychologically appropriate environment for the candidates.
- Be committed to providing feedback on the alignment between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (through support systems).
- Have training in assessment and validation processes and knowledge of quality assurance mechanisms.
- Act in accordance with a code of conduct

4.8.3. Other practitioners involved in the process

The manager is the third key professional in the validation process. They oversee managing the process, the staff and possibly a physical or virtual centre where adults, counsellors and evaluators meet. They may have functions related to the public image of the validation centre, ensuring equal access to the process, managing the resources of the process, and ensuring external review. A very important function they have is financial management. Regardless of the source of funding (public or private), it is difficult to minimise costs and generate a sustainable operation. External observers are responsible for quality control of the evaluation process, staff training and adult performance. Counsellors and evaluators play different roles when it comes to interacting with adults: external observers are responsible for overseeing the separation of these roles. In some cases, they act as advisors to the counsellors and evaluators and help them learn from their experience and that of others. They can monitor the efficiency of the process and check the optimized use of resources. They do not need to be experts in the profession concerned, but they do need to be trained to ensure the quality of the processes. They can come to be considered as a source of advice and have the role of external auditor, without a constant presence in the process.

Finally, mention must be made of the support professionals in charge of counselling, evaluation or management of the centres involved in the process. These people ensure the success of the validation and may act as:

- Responsible for public bodies that finance the process.
- Managers of public bodies that have approved a validation policy.
- Human resources managers in private companies.
- Voluntary sector agents seeking the commitment of groups of people to learn and work.
- Formal sector education services.

5. THE COMPETENCY VALIDATION PROCESS FROM THE COUNSELLOR'S PERSPECTIVE

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The work of the competency validation professionals is critical to determine the quality and confidence in the results of the process. It should be kept in mind that each validation process is unique, and the role of the professionals may vary from adult to adult. The accumulated experience of the counsellors is a very important asset. The role of the counsellor is crucial in the validation process. He/she is the person in charge of recruiting, preparing, and guiding the adult through the process (CEDEFOP, 2009).

In the guidance process, the counsellor will work with the adult to evaluate the learning tests considering the assessment standards. Once this work is done, and before moving

on to the assessment phase, the counsellor is the person in charge of preparing a report regarding all the information gathered from the adult. The report is a crucial document and the basis for the approval of the validation of the competencies contained in it. Therefore, we have dedicated a chapter to explain the counsellor tasks, competences and functions and the learning standards based on which the validation of competencies will be carried out.

5.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF GUIDANCE IN VALIDATION OF COMPETENCIES

Career guidance and validation of non-formal and informal learning are linked to the broader concept of “lifelong learning”. While validation aims to assure that, all learning, irrespective of how and where it has been acquired, is valued, and considered. Career guidance focuses more on personal development. Guidance is defined as a “continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences, and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other setting in which those capacities and competences are learned and used.

Guidance is linked to the validation process with adult guidance during the process or can be found as different guidance activities related to the counselling and assessment part. A practical way to understand their linkage is to analyse the different activities that take place in each process. This table analyses and compares the activities carried out in the guidance process and in the validation process.

CAREER GUIDANCE ACTIVITIES	VALIDATION PHASES
Informative activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advising: helping individuals and groups to interpret information and choose the most appropriate options ● Signposting: ensuring that people have accurate information about all the relevant agencies and the guidance services they provide and, therefore, can select the most appropriate resources for their needs 	No equivalent activity
Developing (Career Management Skills) and autonomy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Counselling: helping individuals to discover, clarify, assess, and understand their own experience and explore available alternatives and strategies for achievement ● Assessing: helping individuals to obtain an organised and structured understanding of their personal, education and vocational development to allow for informed judgments on the 	Identification: increasing an individual’s awareness of prior learning achievements Documentation: providing evidence of the learning outcomes acquired

<p>relevance of opportunities presented (in work, in training, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching: promoting the acquisition of career managing skills, relating to methodologies such as CV and presentation letter creation, job search methods, time management techniques, interpersonal communication techniques • Mentoring: offering individuals and groups support to help them overcome personal barriers and realize their potential 	
No full equivalent as assessment in career guidance tends to be less formalised; it does not have to be carried out by a certified counsellor	Assessment: comparing an individual's learning outcomes against specific reference points and standards
No equivalent activity. Career guidance may support certification, but it is not included as a component in guidance provision	Certification: confirming officially the achievement of learning outcomes against a specified standard
<p>Direct support and capacity building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating: negotiating directly with organizations on behalf of individuals or groups for whom there may be additional barriers to access 	No equivalent activity
<p>Managing critical information and assuring quality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following up: keeping in touch with individuals after guidance interventions, to assess if further guidance is needed and of what type, etc. 	Informing people of future opportunities after completing a validation process

Source: CEDEFOP (2019) *Coordination and Validation*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper; N° 75. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/801290>

5.2.1. Ethical guidance practice

Critical to the relationship and the counsellor's effectiveness is their ethical practice, including their ability to recognize and understand the context and impact of the adult's history, domestic, social, and economic circumstances on their education and learning—in the past, currently and in the future. One of the most useful questions a counsellor can ask themselves when meeting and working with an adult is “What am I assuming that is stopping me from recognizing/understanding/being able to ...?”

A range of factors influence guidance practice, including its definition, the organization of services, when and how citizens can access services and the approaches used. The initial and current professional backgrounds, training, and job roles and responsibilities will be various both within and between EU countries and over time and practitioners may have experience of and be subject to different or combined codes of practice based on the ethical principles of their professional bodies, employers, and countries.

5.2.1.1. Values, ethics, quality standards

Professional values (such as autonomy, respect, trust, consent, impartiality, integrity) are the foundation on which the moral principles or ethics, rules of conduct and standards of professional practice are based.

Mulvey (2002) describes an ethical system as involving:

- Beneficence—what will achieve the greatest good/ensuring that the person experiences something of positive benefit from an interaction with a professional?
- Non-maleficance—not causing harm/choosing the better option from a range of choices?
- Justice—what will be fairest?
- Respect for autonomy—what maximizes the opportunities for everyone involved to implement their own choices?

For examples of guidance professional ethics at the international and national levels, see:

The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) Ethical Guidelines (2017) and / or for the UK The UK Career Development Institute (CDI) Code of Ethics (Career Development Institute, 2019).

5.2.2. Real world tension

The Institute for Employment Research National Guidance Research Forum (Institute for Employment Research, 2021) provides a useful online review and discussion of the tensions counsellor can face when trying to apply an ethical code in the real world of practice, for example, in balancing the rights of the adult with the demands of organizational or legal requirements. Watts (Plant, 2001) reminds us, while as counsellor we readily identify ourselves as working from a client (person) centred perspective, there is an inherent tension in that guidance is a profoundly political and often state funded process that:

'... operates at the interface between the individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances. Within a society in which such life chances are unequally distributed, it faces the issue of whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them.'

5.2.3. Quality

An EU and OECD commissioned review of quality in careers guidance (Plant, 2001), found quality in 'guidance' addressed through statements, guidelines, standards and practitioner competencies from various sources, and perspectives and for different

audiences. National and international non-governmental organizations, partnerships and governmental bodies were busy *'establishing, negotiating, maintaining, and enforcing quality guidelines'* and measuring the quality of guidance for different reasons, for example:

- Political: to justify the service
- Funding: to show that the service is worthwhile
- Client progress: to assess implementation of planned objectives
- Monitoring
- Strategic planning
- Practice and policy development: assessing good practice; benchmarking. economic, ethical, and/or effectiveness criteria

However, *'The weak point is the mutual ownership'*. He concluded that 'quality standards need to be defined at national level or regional level within a national framework because of the way in which guidance practice and policy making varies between countries.

Currently, different member states use their own national standards to describe the educational competencies required by a counsellor. In some countries, the government and employing organizations may require practitioners to hold a relevant qualification and registration or accreditation by a professional body.

Plant raised the need to consider:

- **including green sustainability oriented, ethical, and knowledge-based quality criteria**
- **the implications of new approaches to guidance** for existing/traditional quality standards and professional competencies [and vice versa].

Looking to the future and particularly relevant to the imperatives of 2021 and beyond we need to ensure that ethical practice, quality standards and counsellors competencies keep pace with are responsive to and anticipate both planned and unforeseen development demands and opportunities.

A current example is the faster than previously expected growth of e-guidance and e-training in response to coronavirus restrictions. For example, the MOTIV-ACTION project began in November 2020 to develop innovative methodologies for employment counsellors, career guidance professionals, and adult education providers (EAEA, 2021).

The GOAL (*Guidance and Orientation for Adult Learners*) (2018) project, which ended in 2018, developed or expanded guidance and career orientation interventions for low-skilled adults and is "still considered one of the most successful projects on the topic [of e-guidance"].

'Validation is about making visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals, irrespective of where this learning took place (CEDEFOP, 2020).

5.3. COMPETENCES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE COUNSELLOR IN THE COMPETENCY VALIDATION PROCESS

The professionals involved in the guidance and validation process have different roles and functions: they may be involved in adult selection, identification, and documentation while others are responsible for assessment and certification. It is necessary that these adults have an adequate level of technical competencies to enable them to carry out the required functions.

Based on the Recommendation, information and guidance on the benefits and opportunities offered by the validation process should be made available to adults or organizations interested in participating in the validation process. They should also be aware of the necessary procedures and the facilities for accessing them. The professional in charge of counselling should inform, guide, and advise the person interested in this process in an impartial and complete manner throughout the process. Information must be provided on the costs and benefits of the validation process, emphasizing its influence on the learning process and the promotion of employment. Guidance and counselling actions are especially important to reach people belonging to disadvantaged groups, giving them the opportunity to show their potential. Guidance methods and tools can be used to respond to the needs of specific groups. Adults for the validation process should receive information and counselling on the following aspects (CEDEFOP, 2015):



In addition to reporting on the general aspects of the validation process, they are the persons in charge of elaborating the profiles of the adults with individual information on competencies, work experience, etc. Based on this information, reflected in the counsellor's report, they refer to the counsellors and advise them on participation in the validation. They oversee detecting the competencies that the adult wants to validate.

They must perform an analysis of the participants, determining and documenting the readiness of individuals for validation: identifying the need to provide guidance, clarifying the different career options, and advising on the different learning and work alternatives.

The professionals must be familiar with the validation processes and the different evaluation methodologies and know the mechanisms to guarantee the quality of the process. For this reason, the training, described in actions and capabilities, that counsellors participating in the validation process must have been described below, followed by the competencies of the adult involved in the validation process, considering its phases.

In addition, when low educated, and low-skilled adults are the target group of validation process professional need to develop awareness about the potentials of the validation of prior learning for those adults for their participation in lifelong learning and social inclusion.

5.3.1. Competences of counsellors

The profile of the person who will carry out the assessment for the certification of competencies must have the skills to assess the professional competencies acquired by the adult. These competences must be compared with the reference of competences of a given professional profile European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The counsellors oversee developing the following actions (Martín Pérez & Miranda Santana, 2009):

- design the assessment plan of the professional competence in each professional profile.
- collecting, analysing, and interpreting the information and preparing assessment reports
- coordinating the assessment team and advising the candidate in the professional competence assessment process.

Action	Required competencies
Design of the professional competence assessment plan in each professional profile	Ability to make decisions in a professional competence assessment process
	Know the reference document (competence and evidence guide) in the professional competence assessment process
	Design the professional competence assessment plan by identifying the different elements and ensuring their coherence

Collecting, analysing, interpreting, and reporting information in the competency assessment process	Recognize the importance of the information gathering process in the process of assessing professional competence
	Select and use the most appropriate techniques and instruments for each assessment content
	Organize the information in such a way as to give meaning to the accumulated data and interpret it by contrasting it with the evaluation referent
	To understand the meaning of the evaluation report in the process for the accreditation of professional competence and to initiate in the elaboration of the main elements that compose it
Coordinating the assessment team and advising the candidate in the professional competence assessment process	Recognizing subjectivity in the process of assessing professional competence
	Applying quality criteria in the intervention of the assessment team
	Informing and advising in the professional competence assessment process

In addition, IAEVG (2018) makes a compilation of the competencies that are required for guidance and counselling professionals. It considers core competencies to be the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are required by educational and vocational guidance and counselling professionals, listing the following:

- Ethical behaviour and professional conduct appropriate with the performance of their roles and responsibilities.
- Advocacy and leadership in promoting candidates' learning, career development and personal concerns
- Awareness of cultural settings, concerns, and strengths of individuals, interacting with the entire population.
- Integrate theory and research into guidance, counselling, and consultation practice.
- Skills to design implement and evaluate guidance and counselling programs and interventions.
- Awareness of their capacity and limitations
- Communicate using appropriate language
- Knowledge of up-to-date information on education, training, employment trends, labour market and social issues
- Social and intercultural sensitivity
- Ability to cooperate with a team of professionals
- Knowledge of the lifelong career development process

- Skills and knowledge related to the use of technology.

5.3.2. Functions of the counsellor on validation process

The adult comes to the process with experience that he/she has accumulated throughout his/her formative and working life. It is the counsellor's job to bring their professional experience to the surface to obtain the related information so that it can be evaluated in the assessment phase. To achieve this, one of their missions is to create a climate of trust that facilitates active and participative communication between the adult and the counsellor, in accordance with the code of ethics. The code of ethics to be followed by counsellors is developed in the following section.

The functions to be performed by the counsellor in the validation process are (Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021):

1. Advise the adult in the preparation and fine-tuning of the assessment process, as well as, if necessary, in the development of the professional and training history presented and in the completion of the self-assessment questionnaire. This action consists of the following processes:
 - a. Planning the assessment phase
 - i. Identify the units of competence in which the adult has registered the general requirements to be met and the deadlines for the different phases, to optimize the process.
 - ii. Define the actions to be carried out, adapting the counselling process to the units of competence that are the object of accreditation, to the professional and training background of the adult and to the available resources established by the administrations.
 - iii. To elaborate a proposal for a calendar of group and/or individual sessions to be held in this phase.
 - b. Inform the adult, in-group, individual or virtual sessions, clarifying the doubts generated during the process and completing the information received or other information that may be valuable before the start of the procedure.
 - i. Inform about the legal framework, characteristics, and phases of the procedure.
 - ii. To inform about the characteristics of the units of competence in which he/she is interested, the Vocational Training Titles and the related Certificates of Professionalism.
 - iii. To solve the doubts raised on the previous aspects.
 - iv. To provide, if necessary, complementary information about the procedure.
 - c. Guide the adult during this phase by holding the necessary meetings for the person to self-evaluate his/her professional competence.

- i. Assist in completing the self-assessment questionnaire, clarifying the content of the professional activities performed by the adult and contrasting the professional experience with the mastery of the professional activities.
 - ii. Provide support for the compilation of their training and work information and that corresponds to the professional achievements, the performance criteria and the professional context reflected in the units of competence.
2. To elaborate an orientation report on the suitability of the applicant to pass to the evaluation phase and on the professional competences that it considers sufficiently justified and, if necessary, on the training to complete the unit of competence to be evaluated. This report has the following guidelines:
 - a. Assess the coherence of the information provided by the adult, to deduce his or her probability of passing the assessment phase and communicate to him or her the convenience of continuing in the process.
 - i. Verify that the information collected and selected is in line with the evaluation references.
 - ii. Apply the self-assessment questionnaire of the unit of competence to be accredited to know the result.
 - iii. Identify possible gaps in the adult's professional competence.
 - iv. Assess whether he/she is likely to pass the assessment phase.
 - v. Communicate to the adult, in the negative case, the convenience of not continuing in the process, justifying it with the lack of professional competences.
 - vi. In case of a negative report, propose to the adult more suitable training itineraries with the complementary training and the centres where he/she can receive it, to complete his/her professional competence.
 - vii. In case of a positive report, argue the convenience of their continuation in the process, informing them about the next phase.
 - b. Complete a report for the Evaluation Committee arguing which evidence of professional competence presented is sufficiently justified and which is not.
 - c. Deliver the report and a dossier of the adult's competencies to the Evaluation Commission and collaborate as required.

The Handbook edited by the Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe (NICE) (2012) collects the functions performed by guidance and counselling professionals in their professional practice, which are linked to the competencies that a counsellor should have in the validation process:

- Support individuals in the development of their own career management competencies.
- Support in the assessment of their personal needs and characteristics, connecting them with the labour market and educational systems.
- Helping the adult to understand the situation so that they can work through the problems towards solutions.
- Ensure quality and delivery of services.
- Support clients in crisis and works to change systems for the better.
- Embrace professional values and ethical standards in practice, develops and regulates relationships appropriately, engages in continuous learning and critical thinking, and advocates for the profession.

5.3.2.1. Counsellor's code of ethics

In relation to the responsibility they must assume, counsellors must follow certain guidelines that make up the code of ethics that must guide their actions (Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021):

- Use empathy, active listening, fluid communication and permanent collaboration in the development of their functions.
- Ensure a climate of trust with the adult.
- Motivate the adult towards lifelong learning, for the improvement of his/her professional qualification.
- To recognize the adult as the central focus of the process, being aware of his/her capacities and possibilities and safeguarding his/her professional self-esteem as much as possible.
- To ensure confidentiality with respect to the documentation presented and the actions carried out by the adult during the process.
- Maintain an attitude of collaboration with the competent Administrations and with the Evaluation Commission.
- Avoid any personal, social, professional, or economic conflict of interest.
- Promote the continuous improvement of their performance, periodically carrying out a critical self-evaluation of their performance to introduce, if necessary, the appropriate corrections.

Specifically, these ethical principles can be summarized as follows:

- Maintain rigor in making decisions about the professional competence of the adult. Reflecting on the impact of their attitude or behaviour on the adult.
- Developing the adult's professional self-esteem by using all the instruments available to him/her in the process.

5.4. THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELLOR IN THE VALIDATION PROCESS

In the counselling process, the counsellor must develop actions related to the analysis of professional competencies, the elaboration of the Competencies Dossier and the justification of the information provided by the adult participating in the competencies of the validation process.

5.4.1. Before the process of validation

5.4.1.1. Prepare the environment

Until 2020, much of the literature on guidance assumed that counsellors mostly met and worked face-to-face with an adult. E-guidance was evolving, stronger in some sectors and countries than in others. The coronavirus pandemic has changed all that. The environment in which guidance takes place could be virtual as much as physically face to face or a combination of both. Some old habits and assumptions of face-to-face working must be adjusted when working virtually. Some things may be easier, other things harder. The skills of the counsellor and the needs of the adult are unchanged. The best way to view it may simply be as 'different' some adults, whose digital skills may have developed hugely during pandemic restrictions may now want and expect e-guidance. Many guidance services and practitioners are still adjusting to this, and a 'choice' of environment may not always be possible due to pandemic restrictions and people's vulnerabilities to coronavirus.

Options and resources available to the counsellor can be limited and sometimes make it difficult to control the environment where you first meet the adult. It is important to anticipate and manage the environment where you meet:

- Is it welcoming?
- Is it a physically and psychologically safe location and environment for the adult and you? e.g., would a women-only space be safer for the adult?
- Is it accessible to the adult, including?
 - Meeting the specific physical or sensory, disabilities, long-term illness, and neurodiversity related accessibility requirements of the individual adult, like designing or adapting your time, approach, tools to meet the needs of the individual, or producing translated materials or arranging sign language interpreters for native sign language speakers.
 - More general accessibility, anticipating the complicated and difficult or demanding domestic, social, and economic circumstances many low-skilled adults experience. Examples include, time of day, being easy to travel to - within walking distance or close to public transport, having public toilets available, a good ambient noise level, sufficient privacy for your meeting.
- Gives you the access you need to any resources and any additional or back-up help you might need during or at the end of the meeting, examples include

consent forms, assessment tools, internet access, signposting, reminder, or follow-up information resources or activities for the adult to take away with them.

5.4.1.2. Prepare and adapt to the individual any assessment tools and resources you need

Prepare yourself to include:

- Reading any information, you already have about the adult’s circumstances and interest in validation. Have you checked that nothing within the information is leading you to make assumptions about the adult?
- Can you clearly explain the 4-stage validation process?
 1. Identification
 2. Documentation
 3. Assessment
 4. Certification
- Can you describe the potential benefits and detriments of validation for the adult?
- Do you have information and contact details to hand about other sources of help, courses, and organizations to signpost the person to if needs be?
- Do you have copies of any information sheets, voluntary informed consent, or similar, forms the adult needs to complete if they decide they want to seek validation?
- Do you know what baseline information you need to ask the adult to give you?
- Your phone, IT equipment and internet connection, are it working?
- Someone else is also available to offer mental health first aid (or similar emotional distress support) to the adult, if needed?
- Do you know your organisation's safeguarding, data protection and confidentiality policies/procedures?

Prepare the adult

Ensure the adult has enough (but not too much) information prior to their first meeting to:

- Find the meeting place (virtual or physical) on the right date and time
- Know if there is any cost
- Know what (if anything) to bring with them
- Help them understand how long the meeting will be for
- Understand what will happen in the meeting
- The validation process and the different options for validation entail. This should include how their guidance support will be delivered e.g., whether it will be through digital communication, individual or group interviews.

- The guidance service or counsellor’s contact details and best to get in touch if they have any questions before the meeting or problems attending the meeting.

5.4.2. Getting to know the adult

Prior to initiating the validation process, most learning providers arrange an initial meeting with the adult.

The counsellor could use the initial meeting to establish a positive relationship with the adult. Following welcome and brief introduction, the counsellor could discuss the following question:

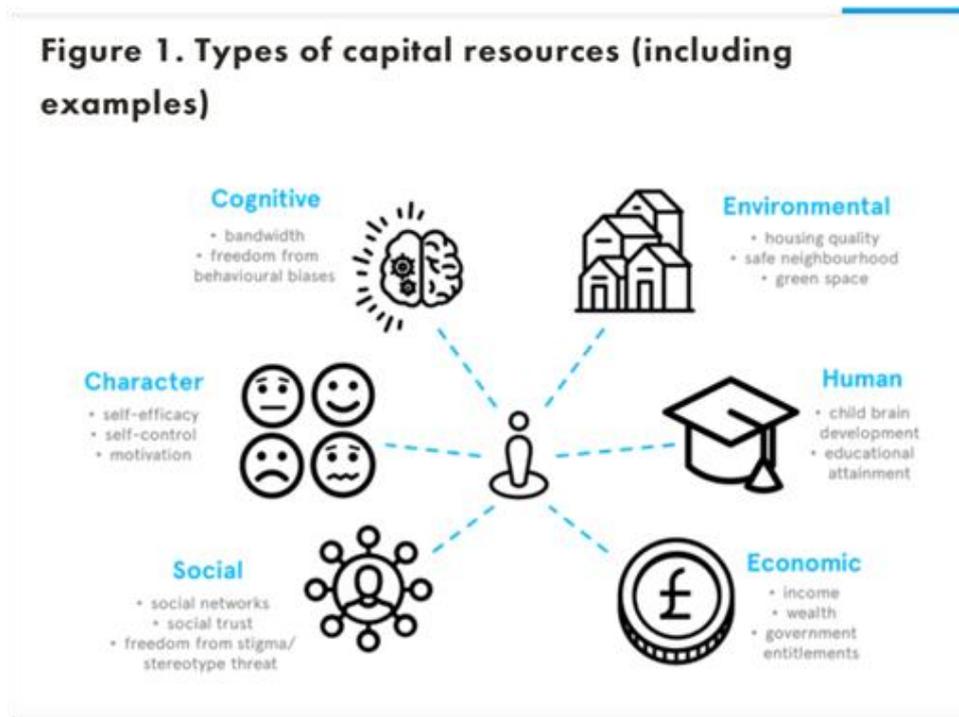
‘What’s the thing you have done/achieved in your life you are most proud of?’

Asking this question (or something very similar) right at the start is designed to:

- increase the adult’s available cognitive bandwidth for the meeting
- counter the emotionally draining, fearful, closed-down effects many low-skilled adults experience whenever they must deal with what feels like officialdom or the state.
- improve their ability to take in and process information and make choices and decision, which are vital to the validation process (by as much as 10 IQ points)

The behavioural psychology evidence for this comes from the ‘Behavioural Insights Team’ or ‘Nudge Unit’ (which started in the UK but works globally and has offices in England and France) (Gandy et al., 2015).

Figure 1. Types of capital resources (including examples)



Explain how the 4-stage guidance and validation process works

‘Validation is a process that can be carried out by different stakeholders within the education and training sector, labour market and third sector. There are four different stages to validation: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification. These stages can be mixed and balanced in different ways.’
(CEDEFOP, 2020)

Describe the time and commitment involved, potential detriments and benefits of validation; for those people who do not meet the eligibility criteria or do not wish to continue there is information and advice with signposting to other opportunities and/or other local sources of support.

- information to be provided to individuals
- existing alternative validation forms available (formative and summative)
- timelines for validation
- costs and procedure
- forms of evidence of learning outcomes
- presentation of evidence
- requirements for evidence
- standards that apply
- assessment and how best to approach the process
- support available
- appeal procedures
- results and outcomes of the validation process

5.4.3. Identification

5.4.3.1. The role of the counsellor

The counsellor initially receives a history of the adult. He/she must review the professional information and evidence submitted, making a first approach to the request for accreditation of competencies. It is based on checking that their work experience and non-formal training are related to the competency to be achieved. The counsellor will obtain a first view of the adult’s professional and training background and context.

The assessment process is based on the collection of professional information and evidence that justifies the adult’s professional experience. It aims to record and organize the evidence of competence that is derived. The counsellor will help the person to consider the experience and training that is linked to the competence to be achieved.

5.4.3.2. Methods for detecting and revealing potential/hidden knowledge and skills

The main role of the counsellor is to create opportunities for the adult to speak and to recognise the skills they have gained. However, many adults may need a starting point

to prompt their reflection. The counsellor to encourage the adult to consider could use the following examples of non-formal and informal learning:

- Learning context - informal or non-formal
- Whether the learning outcomes are clear
- Whether the learning outcomes could be assessed
- What type of assessment could you used?
- Which type of evidence could be collected
- How could that evidence be recorded and by whom?
- How the evidence be stored securely
- Who should be responsible for collating, storing, and updating the evidence?

This could prompt the learners to identify their own examples.

a) Peter and the Wolf

In a local college, one tutor used an online game based on the Russian children’s story of Peter and the Wolf with a group of adults who had no experience of computers or tablets were nervous of using them and thought they were "too old to learn".

In the game, the adults had to use their computer mouse to track the wolf and shoot it by clicking the mouse. When the click was successful, the wolf exploded with a bang. After the first few minutes, the adults were laughing so much they forgot to fear using a computer and continued shooting until their success rates improved.

The tutor observed them throughout and recorded who was successful. At the end of the session, the tutor told them that they could now use a mouse and keyboard on a computer and had successfully completed the first part of the Digital Foundation Skills qualification (Department for Education, 2019) as they could ‘use a mouse and keyboard on a computer, use a touch screen on a smart phone or tablet’.

Every adult completed the session and attended the following session to gain the next part of their qualification.

b) Brighton Robots: Brighton and Hove Council wanted to develop a course for low skilled adults on Robotics and Artificial Intelligence but were having difficulty in recruiting participants. They finally decided to recruit parents from a local primary school in a disadvantaged area to "help your child build a robot."

Their motivation was clear and powerful, and the course was full within a couple of days. Most families successfully built their robot, used their mobile phones to record the robot working and shared it on social media. Adults and children were proud of their achievements. Many enrolled themselves on a follow up course to collaboratively build a larger robot.

c) KERIGMA: In Portugal, KERIGMA is an organisation that is rooted in social development and gives power to learners through the means of education. It has reached out to disadvantaged learners who haven’t had the same access to education

or who have had difficulties in following a traditional educational path. This includes learners from disadvantaged groups like Roma people, people with learning disabilities, addiction, or mental health problems. KERIGMA has the responsibility of educating and validating the skills of these learners to give them a better chance for the future. Specialised tutors in psychology, information technology and foreign languages are employed to help fill knowledge gaps and validate skills.

d) So long URL: In Northern Ireland, county officials in Belfast were concerned about digital inclusion for older adults. They gained funding from the Big Lottery Fund for the Digital Age project (2016) to deliver a learning programme to older adults. Learning consisted of a series of informal learning sessions delivered in people's homes and by a private learning company.

After a couple of sessions, the tutors noticed that many adults wanted to practice their skills between sessions but needed some reference materials and found it difficult to type long URLs. The project developed a series of learning cards, which included QR codes, linked to select sites. Therefore, that learner could use their mobile phones to scan the code on the cards to reach the site without having to type a long URL.

e) Prisoner's peer reading programme: 50% of the adults who end up in prison either cannot read or struggle to read. The Shannon Trust (2012) trains a prisoner who can read (the mentor) to teach a prisoner who cannot read (the learner). The mentor uses a series of manuals for different levels of reading ability. Each manual:

- Includes a range of activities to learn, practice and embed new skills
- Includes built-in progress checks
- Has an introduction for the mentor
- Uses a double page spread with mentor instructions on the left and learner activities on the right.
- Uses synthetic phonics

The mentor works through the Turning Pages manuals with the learner. Each learner works at their own pace and there are no entry requirements or exams, but the learner can complete a progress check whenever they like. As a learner completes each progress check, they are signposted to specific Turning Pages reading books.

f) Reading ahead: In England, 31% of adults do not read in their free time, rising to 46% of young people (aged 16 to 24) (OECD, 2010). Further research (OECD, 2016) conducted in 2015; found that similar percentages of 15-year-olds across the UK do not have a minimum level of literacy proficiency: 18% in England and Scotland, 15% in Northern Ireland and 21% in Wales. Yet reading for pleasure can foster the development of stronger reading habits and increase literacy skills at a greater rate than through formal literacy lessons (Hilhorst et al, 2018).

Reading Ahead is a reading challenge for young people and adults delivered by libraries and learning settings. It can be run digitally or off-line with printed materials. Reading

Ahead asks participants to choose six reads, these can be books, magazines, recipes, letters – anything! After completing each read, participants can share their thoughts on what they have read by filling out a review. Reading Ahead improves reading confidence, builds skills, and encourages everyone to read more. Participants can share their thoughts on what they have read by filling out a review.

g) Live and Learn: Through the medium of videos, this project produced innovative adult education promotional material for the use of adult educators and adult education advocates. The purpose is to raise awareness about adult education and increase participation. The learners in the videos tell their individual stories. All **videos are now also available** on the [Live & Learn Vimeo channel](#).

5.4.3.3. Tools for evidence gathering

These tools should strive for clarity and accuracy and have a central place in the validation process. They are used in the identification phase as a step in identifying the knowledge and competencies that the individual brings to the validation process.

- Test and exams

This type of tool has the advantage of social recognition, validity, and reliability. They are cheaper and faster to perform, compared to other methods. They can be adapted to educational standards in a more direct way than other tools. They can be intimidating for people who have had bad experiences in formal education. This type of test is considered to measure knowledge in a superficial way and cannot capture some of the skills and competencies that the adult has acquired in non-formal and informal learning. The usefulness of this test for measuring practical competencies is more limited.

- Dialogue

In this section, we can find interviews and discussions. Interviews are useful to expand the information that has been previously collected and to accredit documented knowledge, skills, and competencies. It can play an important role in several phases of the validation process to determine the competencies acquired. In the first part, it serves to determine the use of other tests. Interviews have more validity than other tests that are performed. It should be noted that the experience of the counsellor, his or her communication and mediation skills and knowledge of the learning outcomes are crucial to bring validity, reliability, and fairness to the process.

- Declaration

These methods are aimed at determining and recording the adult's competencies. This statement must be made by a third party and compiled in a CV or a competency book. This method is ideal for training evaluations. It is characterized by its flexibility as it allows the adult to reflect on his or her knowledge, skills, and competencies. This type of tool can be considered less reliable than others because it is not externally evaluated.

To improve its reliability, guidelines or standards of use and presentation should be used or it should be done with the help of the counsellor. One of its weaknesses is the lack of a clear mapping of qualifications or standardized frameworks, due to the lack of guidance and the low awarding of qualifications.

- Observation

Observation is a data collection technique that is carried out while the adult performs his or her daily tasks. It is necessary for the counsellor to have a neutral judgment, since during the process the individual characteristics of the adult and the job are revealed. One of the advantages offered by this method is its reliability and the possibility of capturing other competencies that cannot be identified by other means. In addition, it makes it possible to simultaneously assess skills and make a valid measurement. It is considered fair since the person is in his/her usual environment and is not subjected to additional pressure. Observation is not always appropriate since it requires time and, as it is carried out in daily practice, the assessment is specific and not very generalizable.

- Simulation

Simulation involves placing the adult in a situation like a real-life situation to assess competencies. It is often used when observation is not possible. Its use is limited by costs and because there are situations that cannot be observed in real life. It is characterized, in the same way as observation, by its high validity. It is more complex to organize and more expensive than other validation methods. The more realistic the simulation, the more effective the evaluation will be. The simulation gives the possibility to solve part of the problems of the observation carried out during the work, since it allows people to place them in different contexts and to give more validity to the evaluation. The reliability and fairness of this method are high.

- Evidence from work or other practices

In this method, it is the adult who collects physical or intellectual evidence of learning outcomes from work activities, volunteer, or family contexts. This evidence is the basis for validation. They differ from observation in that it is the adult who selects what is to be assessed, being of lesser value than observation. A statement explaining the knowledge, skills and competencies accredited in the test, to help the evaluation and make it more reliable and valid, can accompany the evidence obtained from work. It is often used for the accreditation of professional competencies.

5.4.3.4. GLAS platform

As mentioned at the beginning of the document, the GLAS project aims to enhance the improvement of adults through the identification and validation of their basic competences (language, mathematics and ICT) and to improve the competences of adult education and guidance professionals.

This database provides an overview of different tools useful in guiding the identification, assessment and validation of competences in different EU countries. This platform is accessible to all adult education practitioners and counsellors. This tool enables the exchange of good practices worldwide. In addition to this database, the platform consists of a forum where counsellors can exchange their views, propose discussions, comment on issues arising from professional practice, encourage peer learning and provide support for the use of the tools available on the platform (GLAS project platform, 2021).

You can access to the platform [here](#) or by searching glas-project.eu on internet.

5.4.4. Documentation

Documentation will normally follow the identification stage and involves provision of evidence of the learning outcomes acquired. This can be carried out through the 'building' of a portfolio that tends to include a CV and a career history of the adult, with documents and/or work samples that attest to their learning achievements. Potentially the diversity of evidence that could be used is as varied as the learning experiences of adults and the imaginations of the adult and counsellor. Evidence could be in paper - based or digital format.

Skills audits can use different tools and methods but will normally require a combination of dialogue and standardised testing/assessment. Self-assessments are also frequently used (CEDEFOP, 2009).

In deciding what might count as evidence, it is useful for the adult and counsellors to ask themselves

- What am I assuming that to decide I do not think I can accept this evidence?
- Why do not I think I can evidence this learning?
- Why I do not think that evidence is acceptable.

As the adult is at the centre of the assessment process, the counsellor should encourage the adults to take responsibility for evidencing their own learning, formal, non-formal and informal. Requiring learners to actively track and record their learning progress ensures their engagement in monitoring and evaluation and in the learning itself. This includes the adult taking responsibility for documenting their learning achievements.

5.4.4.1. The role of the counsellor

- Preparation of an adult's dossier

This dossier is made up of all the documentary information and other evidence provided by the adult. The information must be well structured, with the evidence that justifies it. It serves the counsellor for the diagnosis of the adult and for the adult's self-assessment and self-awareness. This document allows the adult to be aware of the

capabilities and deficiencies, a key aspect to link it to a training and professional project related to lifelong learning throughout life.

- Justification of the information

The role of the counsellor is to assess whether the information provided by the adult justifies his/her professional competence for the validation. To do so, the information must follow the following aspects:

- sufficiency: the information must comply with all the aspects included in the competency, allowing the counsellor to justify the adult's professional competence.
- authenticity: there are aspects that require third parties, as they are difficult to verify.
- timeliness: the adult must be competent at the time the competence is to be validated.
- relevance: only the information of the adult that is related to the competency should be reflected.
- Synthesizing information

Once the adult has provided all the information and documentation for the process, the counsellor must synthesize all the information. It serves as support for the preparation of the counsellor's report.

5.4.4.2. Tools for presenting evidence

Methods collected for evidence gathering need to be subsequently documented. Documentation not only enables evaluation but can also be an independent outcome to validation.

Requiring learners to actively track and record their learning progress ensures their engagement in monitoring and evaluation and in the learning itself. This includes the adult taking responsibility for evidence documentation. Apprenticeship's assessment portfolios might offer an example of a tried and tested transferable format and method for adults to collect their documentary evidence of informal, non-formal, and formal learning within the validation process.

- Curriculum vitae or statement of individual competencies

This is one of the most common methods of documenting the knowledge, skills, and competencies of adults. It is mainly used for job applications and differs from country to country. The CV is a statement of individual qualifications and experiences, as well as indicating the competencies derived from these as in the case of the Europass CV. Regarding statements of competencies, they can be considered as a list of competencies or following the CV format with a structured section where the competencies are listed.

- Third-party reports

Third-party reports can take several forms. They can be letters of reference from supervisors or employees. They are common, but employees often have difficulty crediting their actual work experience, especially when their performance exceeds the competencies assigned to the position. These reports can help document actual tasks performed.

- Competency portfolio

The portfolio is one of the most complex and widely used methods of documentation. It uses a combination of instruments to obtain evidence of the adult's competencies, providing achievements and successes. It should include evidence obtained by different methods. This portfolio allows the person to submit to a validation process, but it is also useful for job search or to complement training. It can help people to get out of a situation of social exclusion. It is a time-consuming exercise. It is necessary that the knowledge collected be properly documented to avoid difficulties in validating it. Elaborating this document can be complicated for adult, which is why the counsellor must inform and guide the adult. The counsellor's help and self-reflection bring more equity and effectiveness to the portfolio. If this document is related to formal education, it is advisable to have guidance to use the appropriate theoretical terms.

- E-portfolios

JISC (2021) describes an e-portfolio as a "collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning". It could include audio, video,

Apprenticeships' assessment portfolios offer an exemplar of a tried and tested transferable format and method for adults to collect their documentary evidence of informal, non-formal, and formal learning within the validation process.

There is no one type of e-portfolio system. Since e-portfolios can serve different purposes and are intended for use in different scenarios, a variety of system types can be used, ranging from Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (FutureLearn, 2021) based tools to commercial systems and open-source products such as Moodle.

Evidencing learning: Apprenticeship portfolios

In the UK, apprenticeships combine practical training in a job with study. There is no upper age limit. An apprentice is employed by an employer in an apprentice position of at least 30 hours per week. Some large employers are also directly providing the training for the respective apprenticeship framework. All other employers work with a local private or public training provider registered to deliver the apprenticeship framework.

Most apprentices spend one day per week at the training providers location. The training provider delivers a good percentage of the knowledge elements, along with basic skills such as numeracy, language and digital skills. Qualified assessors regularly visit the apprentice in their place of work to offer information, advice and guidance as well as observing the apprentice carrying out their duties – part of the assessment process.

In England, [East Midlands Housing Group](#) has an apprenticeship academy. Apprentices are required to gather and record evidence of achievement/competence against a set of pre-determined competencies mapped to their apprenticeship framework, and if they have no formal qualifications, to evidence achievement of the required basic skills.

Apprentices are responsible for collating their evidence in a dedicated folder and identifying when they believe they have met competencies, whether knowledge and/or demonstrable skills. This clearly gives responsibility to the apprentice.

In some cases, apprentices use an e-portfolio, which lets them see clearly what they have achieved and what is left to do. Employers also have access to the e-portfolio to monitor their apprentices' progress. Evidence uploaded comprises written pieces of work, observation sheets and witness statements from experienced members of staff plus photos or videos. This is a well-liked method as most learners own their own digital mobile phone and it is easy.

- Digital badges

Provide an innovative assessment method for adults' skills. They recognise learning acquired outside formal education and validate the accomplishment, skill, or competencies earned. A badge is a picture containing embedded meta-data. This includes a record of the recipient of a badge, the issuer of the badge; the criteria for earning the badge; and the supporting evidence. Digital badges have multiple advantages in the context of assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning.



Figure 1: Open badges: <https://openbadges.org/>

Digital badges:

- Are easily shared e.g., through social media with employers or educational institutions

- Can be stored safely e.g., in a portfolio or virtual backpack
- Evidence chunks of learning
- Recognise competencies as well as skills and knowledge

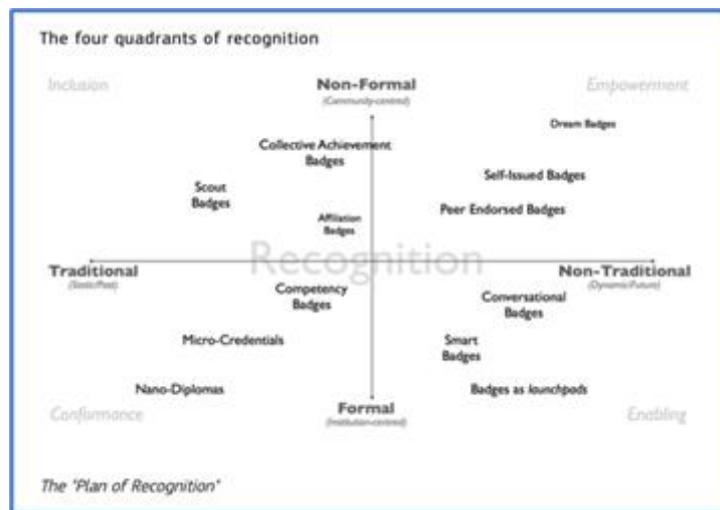


Figure 2: Ravet, S. (2017) recognising and recording learning using digital badges.

- Cannot be stolen or modified but endorsements or supplementary evidence can be added
- Are owned by the adult rather than by an educational institution, so contributing to an adult-centred approach to assessment and validation (Vega & Garcia, 2020)
- Are used by the UNESCO to track learning and give people a valuable, trusted way to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. The platform connects learners with learning providers and employers, all in one digital space, which allows employers to find the right person for a job.

5.4.4.3. Frameworks

- Digital

The EU DigComp 2.1 (Carretero, Vuorikari & Punie, 2018) identifies the key components of digital competence in five areas:

- Information and data literacy
- Communication and collaboration
- Digital content creation
- Safety
- Problem solving

Based on this conceptual model, DigComp presents eight proficiency levels, from very basic to advanced, and gives examples of use applied to the learning and employment field. DigiComp not only provides a common language and terminology to talk about and design new projects on digital competence in all kinds of areas but also essential

guidance and support in the definition of education and training actions to develop digital competence.

- Numeracy

Although there is currently no framework for numeracy, which has been adopted across the EU, the Common European Numeracy Framework (University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, 2021), is a tool that has been designed in the Netherlands to improve the numeracy attained by individuals. It looks at content, skills, attitude, and affective and psychological aspects and is intended for use by teachers, the providers of courses about numeracy, policy makers and politicians.

- Language

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability. It describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. The CEFR was created without reference to any specific language, which guarantees their relevance and across-the-board applicability. The descriptors specify progressive mastery of each skill, which is graded on a six-level scale (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2).

- The European Qualification Framework (EQF)

The EQF (European Union, 2008) is a common European reference framework which aims to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems.

Learning outcomes express what individuals know, understand, and can do at the end of a learning process and individual member countries develop national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) to implement the EQF.

The EQF covers all types and all levels of qualifications, and the use of learning outcomes makes it clear what a person knows, understands, and can do. The level increases according to the level of proficiency, level 1 is the lowest and eight the highest level. Most importantly, the EQF is closely linked to national qualifications frameworks, this way it can provide a comprehensive map of all types and levels of qualifications in Europe, which are increasingly accessible through qualification databases.

The counsellor needs:

- a broad understanding of the respective qualification frameworks and needs to understand the frameworks that apply
- an ability to make this information accessible to the individual adult in such a way that can be in control of the process and make informed choices and decisions about validation of their prior learning and any recommended further informal, non-formal or formal learning to achieve certification and progress in their domestic, civic education or employment aspirations.

5.4.5. Assessment

According to Cedefop (2014), assessment is the:

‘Process of appraising knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria (learning expectations, measurement of learning outcomes), assessment is typically followed by certification.’

In January, SOLAS (2018) published Handbook of National Guidelines which stated that: assessment is learner centred; based on the individual’s knowledge, skills, goals, and aspirations; any dimension of literacy or numeracy the person needs to achieve their goal should be assessed; participation is Voluntary and Confidential.

The assessment process may be formal or informal, structured, or unstructured, but it always poses a question, and the answer always leads to action. What form that action will take depends on the learner’s goals and aspirations. Examples include educational goals, e.g., to get a qualification, Economic goals, e.g., to find a job or to advance in their present job.

Basic skills assessment generally consists of an initial assessment plus ongoing assessment of numeracy, literacy and digital skills and may use both summative and formative approaches e.g., Formative: helping the adult to increase their self-confidence; Summative: Identify how the adult could acquire bite sized learning (micro learning) (CEDEFOP, 2009).

For the assessment phase, it is helpful to consider the following questions:

- Do you need to adapt assessment tools to the individual’s needs and characteristics?
- To what extent have you based your selection of assessment tools on their reliability and/or validity?
- Which reference point (standard) are you using? Are they suitable for capturing the individual variation that characterises non-formal and informal learning?
- Is the adult and/or any employers and education institutions aware of the conditions for assessment in terms of procedure, tools, and evaluation/assessment standards?

It is important to select an assessment tool or combination of tools that are fit for purpose, which provide adults with the opportunity for self-exploration, and can be used to extract evidence of learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. This includes being able to identify which tool to use in specific contexts and how to distinguish good quality tools from poor ones.

For some adults, conversation methods or observations may be appropriate, while for others, a test or examination may be more appropriate.

Criteria to consider include:

- validity: does the tool measure what it is intended to measure?
- reliability: is it reliable? i.e., will identical results be achieved every time an adult is assessed under the same conditions?
- Is it fair? the extent to which an assessment decision is free from bias (context dependency, culture, and counsellor bias)
- cognitive range: does the tool enable counsellors to judge the breadth and depth of the candidate's learning?
- Is it fit for the purpose of the assessment: does the assessment tool match the use for which it is intended?

The adult, following an introduction to a range of tools by the counsellor, could make the final decision on the choice of assessment tools. These could include online or offline tests; self-assessment tools, demonstrations; essays; biographical methods.

Possible tools could also include innovative and emerging approaches to assessment:

- Project explored the use of Innovative Assessment Methods for Validation. Examples included digital badges (IMS Global Learning Consortium, 2020) which are validated by employers who define the learning objectives (generally non-formal or informal). Digital badges are also used by Learning Cities (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021).
- The EAEA (2021) state of play report: Basic skills development in selected European countries provides insight into the ongoing practices and policy initiatives in basic skills development concerning adults with primary, less than primary, and lower secondary education in selected countries.
- In Ireland, Initial and ongoing assessment of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills is carried out using the assessment. The learner demonstrates ability by engaging in complex tasks that probe their technical abilities, skills, and competence in broader dimensions of learning. Performance is assessed and recorded according to specified criteria or outcomes.

5.4.5.1. The role of the counsellor's

- Preparation of the counsellor's report

The counsellor's report is a document produced at the end of the documentation phase. The purpose of the report is to justify the professional competencies provided by the adult in the early stages of the non-formal and informal learning validation process. It should cover the professional information and persons provided by the adult. The counsellor must provide a reasoned explanation of the information presented, making a diagnosis that gives access or not to the evaluation and certification phase.

- The counsellor's report

The preparation of this report is the culmination of the identification and assessment phase and the link to the evaluation phase. One of the functions of the counsellor is to

prepare a report on the adult for the validation process. Its purpose is to justify the professional competencies that the adult has provided during the assessment phase, helping the Commission to optimize the evaluation process. It should reflect the results of the professional information gathering process and/or evidence provided. This report is related to the suitability of the adult to participate in the assessment process and on the professional competences that he/she considers to be sufficiently justified and the necessary training to complete the Unit of Competence to be assessed. This report is composed with a systematization of evidence of the competences, related to the professional information and evidence provided for the assessment. It includes the convenience for the adult to access to the next phase, and may include two evaluations (Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021):

- Positive: when the professional information and evidence submitted meet the evaluation requirements.
- Negative: when the professional information and evidence falls short of the assessment and there is little chance of passing the assessment.

In addition, the counsellor must provide a reasoned explanation of the professional information and evidence and argue a diagnosis of his/her assessment of his/her professional and educational background.

The structure of the report should be as follows:

- Personal data of the adult.
 - Information on the unit of competence on which advice has been given.
 - Modality of counselling: face-to-face/telematics and information on the different sessions.
 - Basis of the report:
 - Justified professional competencies
 - Argumentation for the assessment diagnosis
 - Counselling diagnosis: positive/negative and decision of the applicant
 - Training proposal
 - Counsellor involved in the process.
- Actions and communication of results

Once the report has been completed, the counsellor should communicate the results of this phase to the adult. It begins with a review of the actions and evidence provided. Then, the adult is informed if he/she has sufficient conditions to achieve the competency assessment.

In the case of a negative result, the reasons will be explained, and a training plan will be proposed so that the adult can achieve the validation of the competence in future actions. If the adult wishes to access the assessment phase, the counsellor must reflect

this in the report. This is the most delicate communication. For this, the information must be argued with specific and tangible data.

If the adult passes to the assessment phase, it is necessary to make the adult see the professional competencies he or she possesses. He/she should also be informed if there is a lack of competencies to achieve validation, the needs, and options for training.

When the counsellor has finished the assessment process, all the documentation is transferred to be evaluated by the experts and he/she must justify all the actions he/she has developed in the documentation phase.

5.4.6. Certification

Adults with no or few certificated qualifications may be unfamiliar, beyond the memories or fears of taking and failing in examinations, with the rationale and requirements of certification. As a result, for some people the idea of a certificate from an awarding body can feel like a huge hurdle, which they are sure, will fall.

What are you assuming?

Drawn from the work of Nancy Kline the question, *“What are you assuming that is making you think you can’t achieve certification?”* Can be incredibly useful in this case. The adult’s answer may help them unblock their own thinking and provide the counsellor with the insight they need into the best way to help the person understand certification in a way that will reduce their doubts or fears and enable them to see certification as both achievable for them and something to look forward to and be proud of. Every adult educator is familiar with just how powerful that first formal ‘certificate’ is for adults with no prior qualifications as achievable for themselves. Will be helpful during the validation process to gradually build their awareness of this and to provide examples so that they realise that if their validation is going to lead to a certificate there are some steps that will need to be followed: achievable and important for others to value their certification as equal to the certification acquired through formal education. Preparing to understand the certification stage, it is the following questions need to be asked:

- How is the credibility of the authority/awarding body assured?
- To what extent can the outcomes of validation (documents, portfolios, certificates, etc.) be exchanged into formal qualification/s, and opportunities for education and/or employment?

5.4.6.1. Consistency and credibility

Although at the policy level, several EU countries have made significant progress in developing frameworks and the number of countries without a national strategy for validation has decreased (CEDEFOP, 2015).

The credibility and awareness of any validation process and its outcome is an important issue. The traditional hierarchy of institutions and forms of learning, the University at the pinnacle, means that people, including those who have informal and or non-formal learning, do not see the learning as equivalent to that which takes place in institutions. This in turn makes people suspicious that duplication of different forms of learning is somehow not really of the same value: not as hard, not as rigorous, not as serious, not as valuable. If even some adults, guidance services, education providers, awarding bodies, employers and politicians refuse to recognise and value the assessment and validation of informal and non-formal learning the yes will falter, not be trusted and eventually make to sleep too slow progress to help low skilled adults. If it is trusted, the outcomes will be of more benefit to the adult and society in terms of the adult's citizenship, educational or employment and the goal of reskilling and upskilling the least educated adults in Europe.

Certification of non-formal and informal learning needs to be against agreed reference points such as recognised qualifications and or occupational standards. Whilst the identification and documentation phase of validation does not need a formalised standard, the assessment and certification of equivalence to a qualification needs to be carried out to agreed and approved standards based on learning outcomes. The use of standards that are either the same as, or equivalent to, the standards for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes is important to ensure consistency in the validation system.

5.4.6.2. Effects of the accreditation of competencies

The accreditation of a unit of competence acquired by this process has the effect of partial and cumulative accreditation, with the purpose of completing the training for obtaining the corresponding degree or certificate.

It is the role of the Educational Administration to recognize the accredited units of competences, which will facilitate the validation of the corresponding professional modules, and which is established in each of the degrees.

The Labour Administration will recognize the accredited units of competences that will be exempted from the training modules associated to the units of competence of the certificates of professionalism that are established in each of the certificates.

The validation process may lead to obtaining a complete or partial training. That is why the counsellor must inform the candidate and indicate in his/her report the possible training options to achieve the completion of the set of modules/assignments of the program.

5.4.7. Follow-up and continuity in the validation process

The procedure is supported by quality mechanisms to ensure that the processes applied are carried out in accordance with the administrative and methodological requirements designed for this purpose.

The process requires total transparency and is based on a set of instruments that must be valid and with a rigorous and systematic dedication, obtaining homogeneous and reliable results.

The uniqueness of the counselling process is based on its individual character, in a double aspect: that of the adult and that of the counsellor. For this reason, to avoid distractions, standardized action criteria should be established and adapted to the diversity of cases that may arise, so that the results obtained are equivalent or similar, regardless of who carries out the counselling process.

Quality control of the process should define objectives, maintain uniformity of criteria, and establish a register that functions as a guarantor of quality.

The actions carried out by the counsellor, together with the decisions taken in relation to the participant, must be recorded to know the traceability and follow-up throughout the process.

The verification of the monitoring and control of the validation process should be aimed at confirming that the actions are being carried out according to the established criteria, with a homogeneous interpretation when the candidates are assessed.

The counsellor should analyse the results, in the first place, at the same time self-evaluating his/her performance in the process.

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7. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- **Competence:** competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, where:
 - knowledge is composed of the facts and figures, concepts, ideas, and theories which are already established and support the understanding of a certain area or subject
 - skills are defined as the ability and capacity to carry out processes and use the existing knowledge to achieve results
 - attitudes describe the disposition and mind-sets to act or react to ideas, persons, or situations.

- **Key competences:** key competences are those, which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, sustainable lifestyle, successful life in peaceful societies, health-conscious life management and active citizenship. Competences can be applied in many different contexts and in a variety of combinations. They overlap and interlock, aspects essential to one domain will support competence in another.

- **Basic skills:** UNESCO defines basic skills as the fundamental knowledge as well as operational aspects of knowledge needed for learning, work, and life. Within the curriculum, literacy and numeracy are normally considered as foundational, essential, or basic skills. The term can include a range of skills that individuals need to live successfully in contemporary society.

- **Counsellor:** The counsellor in the competence validation process is the person who has direct contact with the low-skilled adult in this case. They are in charge of providing information and advice to the adults involved in the process. They help to include the adult in the process and to prepare the assessment and provide guidance after the decision taken in the assessment.

- **Formal learning:** Formal learning is learning that results from institutionalized, intentional, and planned education by accredited public and private agencies that are part of the country's education system.

- **Non-formal learning:** non-formal learning also results from an institutionalized, intentional, and planned process by any education provider. It represents an alternative or complementary training to that acquired within the formal system. It caters for all age groups and is generally provided in the form of short courses, seminars, or workshops.

- **Informal learning:** Informal learning is understood as non-institutionalized learning, not programmed or intentionally acquired, although it may be oriented. It refers to the experience gained in daily life, in the family circle, at work or in the local environment.
- **Low-skilled adults:** According to the OECD, low-skilled adults are adults with low educational level, namely those whose highest qualification is at lower-secondary level, which means they have not completed high school or equivalent. In addition, low-skilled adults are defined as adults with low cognitive skill levels, namely those who score at proficiency level one or below in the literacy and/or numeracy dimension of the OECD survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC). These are adults who can at most complete very simple reading tasks, such as read brief texts on familiar topics, and mathematical tasks, one-step or simple processes involving counting, sorting, and basic arithmetic operations and understanding simple percentages.
- **Validation of non-formal and informal learning:** Validation is a process by which an authorized body confirm that an individual has acquired the measured learning outcomes against a relevant standard and consist of four phases:
 - Identification, through dialogue, of a person's specific experience
 - Documentation to make the person's experience visible
 - Formal Evaluation of that experience
 - Certification of the results of the evaluation, which may lead to a full or partial qualification.