

How to create a mobile European LLL culture by the complementary use of European instruments such as VNFIL, RPL, micro credentials and the EQF

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1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are becoming aware that lifelong learning is a core mission in education and part of the essential process of continuing education and skill-building throughout life. Opportunities for further learning act as enablers of success. However, they require access to a fit-for-purpose education system to ensure they provide equal opportunities to all as well as being open to those from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds. Therefore, a range of digital tools and internationally agreed-upon standards is essential in the development of lifelong learning courses to guarantee accessibility from a wide range of learners.

The purpose of this publication is to highlight the existing European documents, programs and tools which can be used for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) and existing frameworks which ensure transparency and international comparability of VNFIL.

2. Framework of validation

The content of this section aims to inform about the background, concept, and possible ways to ensure that validation is an accessible, fair and transparent process. Furthermore, the structure of validation is outlined in order to set an overview of the actual process. Here it is important to raise attention towards possible informalities the process of validation is likely to obtain due to the individuality of the individual candidate (Cedefop, 2015; Birke & Hanft, 2016).

2.1 Outlines

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) seeks to prove comprehensive competence in a field of study, irrespective of the combination of formal, informal, and non-formal learning through which this competence has been obtained. To ensure validation is accessible, transparent procedures and comprehensive informa-

tion as well as support should be provided by the assessing universities. Fairness and reliability are achieved through the collection of evidence of non-formal and informal learning and formative and summative assessments.

VNFIL allows the learner to obtain a formal certification of their competences and can enable them to progress further in higher education. Validation decisions are made on an individual basis and are subject to peer-review to ensure good practice.

Validation processes must be transparent and inspire confidence through ensuring the requirements of reliability, validity and quality assurance are met, while guaranteeing they address individual and diverse learning experiences while increasing visibility and highlighting value of learning (Mäkelä, 2019).

The concept of validation is based on the “European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning” (Calleja & Eckert, 2016). The points raised in the recommendation should not be considered as individual parts but as part of a larger framework of lifelong learning, in which they form the basis of a cohesive approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

2.2 The validation procedure

The documentation of competences can be seen as a starting point in the validation process. There must always be a transparent review and methodically documented project management; a formal procedure would not be sufficient. Applicants’ existing competences are transferred and compared to the curriculum (or parts thereof, hence module, course etc.). The competence-oriented formulation of curricula and the formulation in the form of learning outcomes are a prerequisite for this process: “learning outcomes’ means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence” (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2008, p. 4).

As part of the process, attention will be paid to verifying competences acquired informally by third parties. As with formal documents, verifying the authenticity of confirmations is challenging. The level and content must be identifiable from supporting documents. However, great emphasis lies on the individual responsibility of the applicants and the mutual trust between the university and the applicant.

3. The phases of the validation process

The validation procedure for learning outcomes acquired non-formally or informally is divided into phases. The first being the Identification of existing knowledge, skills and competences. An emphasis is placed on the formative approach to give the candidates opportunities for self-reflection. Following phases include Documentation and Assessment which lead to the final Certification in the form of a qualification or credits (Fig. 1).

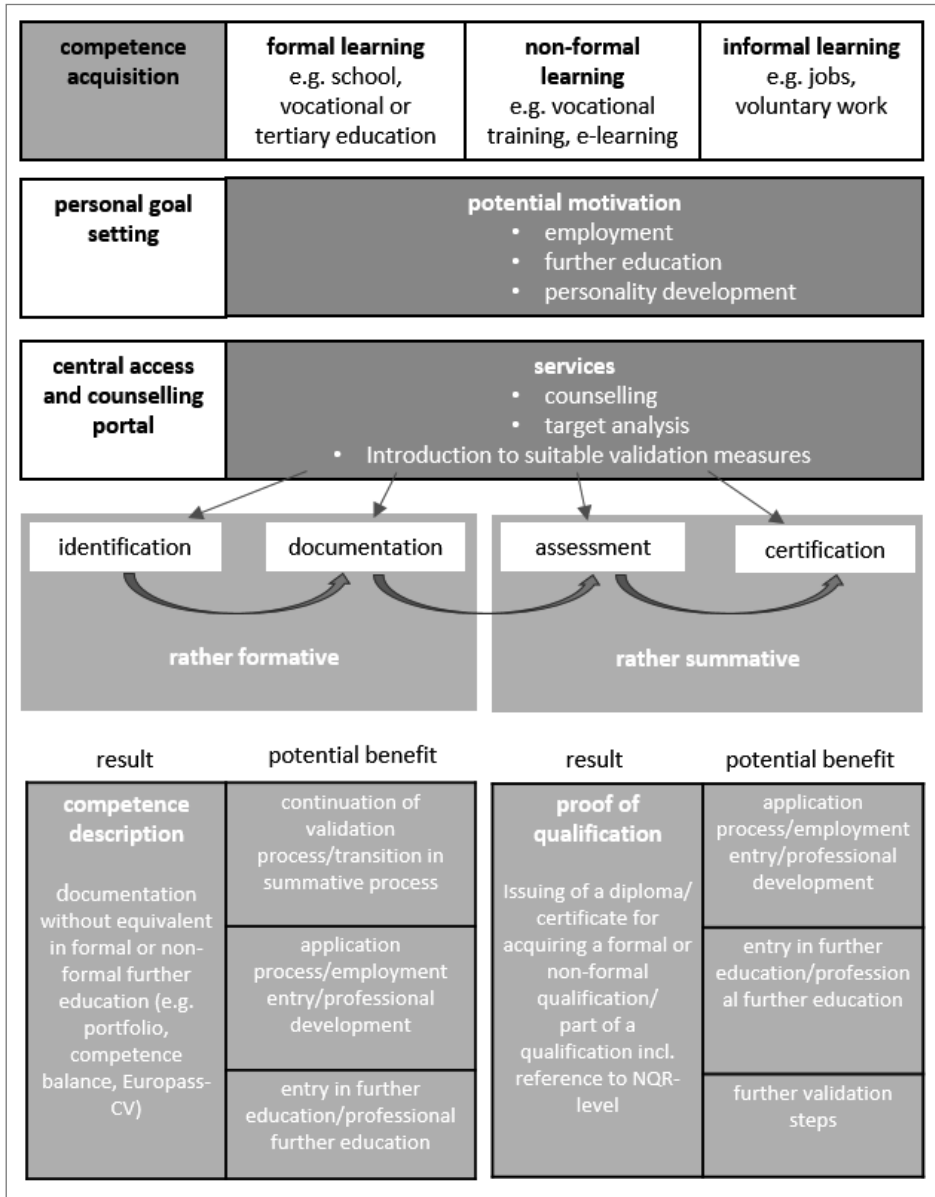


Fig. 1: Validation as a comprehensive process (BMB & BMWFW, 2017, p. 14)

3.1 Identification

Identification is crucial in validation as learning outcomes are acquired in a variety of individual contexts. Recognizing this non-standardized aspect of non-formal and informal learning is a somewhat methodological challenge. Certification methods used must be “open to the unexpected”; their design must be non-restrictive and address the diversity of learning opportunities.

Because of the individuality of the learning paths of each candidate, a balance is needed between the use of standardized (IT-based) instruments and approaches based on personal dialogue (see instruments). The validation process and other activities of the candidate’s professional development need to be interconnectible. This can be achieved through a personal development plan which describes the individualized learning pathway and includes further orientation, formal and informal learning, work experience, further validation steps etc.

3.1.1 Raising awareness and offering relevant information

Promoting validation requires a systematic effort to demonstrate the relevance of all forms of learning and illustrate how validation is directly and legitimately relevant for further learning and employment (see also Cross, 2015). To reach a broad group of potential users and address the widest possible variety of needs, information must be systematically circulated within and across institutions and sectors. Information needs to be offered in accessible formats. Webpages and digital resources can aid in this process and are essential to reach a broad audience. Visualization of the possible validation outcomes plays an important part.¹

3.1.2 Offering a variety of tools for the identification phase

Tools used in the identification phase must be adaptable to personal needs. Digital and paper-based tools are of great value in reaching a large audience at a low cost, but it is important to note that standardized approaches may not benefit all learners. Therefore personalized, dialogue-based advice and counselling is often more effective.

Possibilities to raise the candidate’s awareness of the value of his/her already acquired knowledge, skills and competences would be Web offerings with comprehensive information and e-tools and declarative methods such as descriptions, portfolios and written reflections (can be carried out independently and unaccompanied) (Figure 2). Offline examples and templates are available and can be adapted according to the target group of the university course.

Furthermore, formative self-assessment with the aim of reflecting on one’s own learning processes or the learning career is needed but should be based on the competences of an individual.

¹ Examples can be found at MTU (n.d.) wba (n.d.).

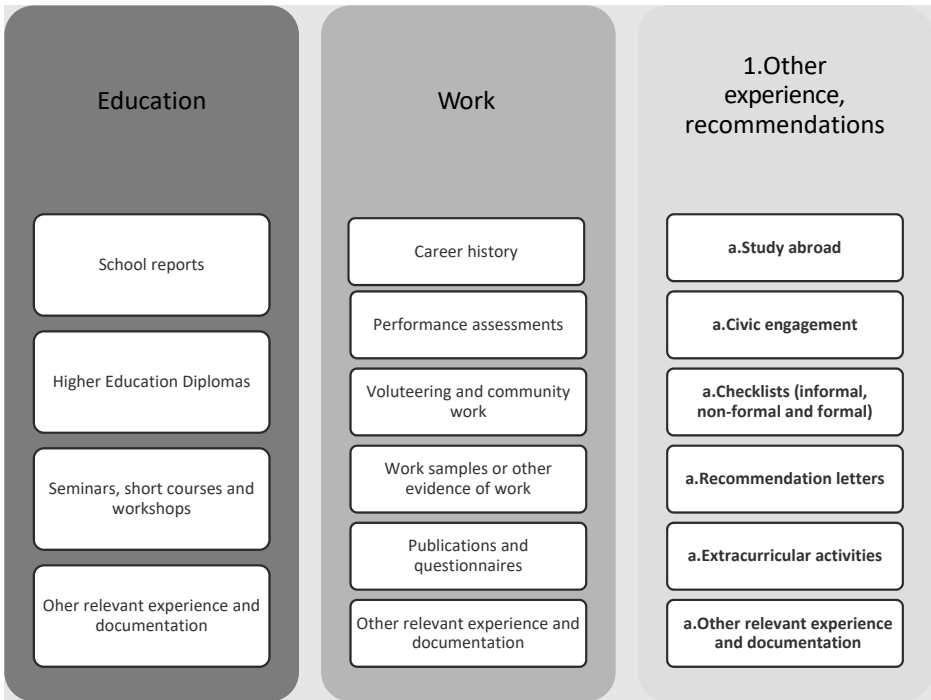


Fig. 2: Exemplary tools for the identification phase

An On- and Offline Checklist (summative, targeted, standardized and online-based) with the aim of comparing the acquired competences with standardized procedures to prepare further stages (II, III, IV) and procedural steps – for both procedures – for access and accreditation would also be useful.

A portfolio of experience and learning can be used to aid the process of identification and forms a good basis for the documentation phase. Europass, a digital tool to plan career development and record experiences and skills, can aid in the creation of a portfolio and a curriculum vitae (CV).

Learning documented in the portfolio differs by individuals but follows broad categories which may overlap.

3.2 Documentation

Documentation includes the provision of evidence of the learning outcomes acquired. However, validation cannot be limited to traditional media. Evidence must provide sufficient insight into learning outcomes; a simple enumeration of professional titles or positions is insufficient.

The main objective in this phase is to supply the candidate with a file with all the data (e. g. a portfolio; see 4.1 'Portfolio') that identifies relevant references and insights. Evidence of skills already acquired must be included in the documentation. However, this also raises the question to what extent existing documentation formats support the transferability of acquired knowledge, skills, and competences.

Clear criteria for the documentation of non-formal and informal learning (including deadlines etc.) are key in this phase of validation, as well as a web-based form, which was created similarly to an equivalence list form for the recognition with the learning outcomes of the university course-program and for the admission stating the competencies required for the university course-program (Learning Incomes).

This online tool for validation holds the possibility to upload the following documents:

- Europass and/or any other way of presenting a curriculum vitae
- Evidence of formal qualifications
- Evidence of initial and continuing training, including short courses
- Qualifications, business licenses, professional/commercial registrations
- Employment documents such as service certificates, performance assessments
- Confirmations/documents on previous employment relationships and experiences
- Letter of recommendation from current and former employers, superiors and colleagues
- Recommendations from persons with relevant qualifications in the areas assessed
- Recommendations from superiors indicating skills and knowledge in professional practice
- Photographs and/or work samples
- Reports, critiques, articles indicating the level of knowledge, as well as analysis and written expression skills in relation to the topic
- Confirmation or, in the case of self-employment, proof of the management of an undertaking and the necessary skills and knowledge
- Videos from everyday work, which are recorded by colleagues via video cameras and show typical tasks in everyday life

3.3 Assessment

Assessment is essential for the credibility of the VNFIL and must be accompanied by quality assurance procedures to ensure that all phases of validation, including assessment, are subject to critical review.

Access to the university course program requires documents that show the learning outcomes for admission are demonstrated, even if the applicant does not formally

meet the admission requirements. AQ Austria explicitly states transparency and recommends:

- Transparency must be ensured internally (university) and externally (against applicants, candidates and students).
- The use of the procedures also requires that applicants and students provide transparent proof of their competences.

Due to the individual characteristics of the learning outcomes concerned, the use of several tools may be necessary, such as a combination of a written exam and a practical demonstration. Particular attention will be paid to the demonstration of competences in relation to the learning outcomes of the curriculum in the university courses programs for which credit is to be awarded. The assessment is carried out by a jury that meets the requirements of the respective competence standard.

Information provided by the university about the requirements of the assessment instruments used and the expected level of performance has to be sufficient. The assessment design is supposed to reflect the needs and possibilities of the candidates as well as the learning environment. This phase is carried out in a supportive setting and is based on pre-agreed criteria. Feedback on the results is provided.

Because a jury carries out the assessment (e. g. course management, LV-manager, accreditation officer, a subject-specific external person + others if applicable), a range of selection criteria must be available. This could be a form for comparing portfolio analysis or a collection of materials that compares previous learning with the learning outcomes of the curriculum. A form for the assessment results of the documented work samples (videos etc.) to verify skills and their application in practice based on examples and to test the quality of the actual work, or to check the application of theoretical knowledge in a structured way could be another option.

Depending on the university courses programs it is likely that different methods of simulation for examination situations would have to be developed. They are adapted to enable candidates to be placed in a situation that is close to actual practice to assess their competences. A standardized examination form, also to clarify open questions arising from the evidence and/or to check the scope and depth of learning, to verify a profound understanding of complex topics and the ability to explain them in simple words is a key factor to determine the eligibility of the candidate.

European Initiatives

To gain confidence in the process it is crucial to exchange and discuss different forms of assessments. Peer review can be used to supplement and improve the usual quality assurance systems in the field of validation and to take an area-specific, development-oriented look at the quality of validation initiatives. It also contributes to the professionalization of VNFIL practitioners and transnational peer reviews enhance cooperation, cross border learning, and transparency in Europe.



Fig. 3: Next Peer Review (Peer Review European Network, n.d.)

The project ‘Peer Review VNFIL Extended’ provides a common framework and tools for Peer Review for VNFIL providers to evaluate and improve their VNFIL provision and practices and to learn from different countries, increasing consistency of practices.

It thus also aims to strengthen policies, to intensify European cooperation and mutual trust in VNFIL including all levels of the system – providers, authorities, stakeholders, and practitioners. The Peer Review VNFIL Extended project works with the European Peer Review methodology and tools developed in previous projects. A face-to-face training program qualifies VNFIL practitioners to conduct a Peer Review.

3.4 Certification

The final phase of validation is the certification of the identified and documented learning outcomes. In any case, an assessment is required at the certification stage to officially confirm that the learning outcomes identified are in line with a predetermined standard.

The use of summative approaches for the validation of non-formal and informal learning for university courses-program should be linked to the national qualification system. It must be clear what level the accredited qualifications correspond to. The prerequisite is that the learning outcomes of the curricula of the university courses

program are assigned to the NQF levels. The results of the validation process are recorded in a report and/or confirmed in a certificate or diploma.

Instruments and tools needed:

- A standardized form for admission or accreditation.
- A standardized form for the documentation of the assessment results.
- A standardized form for an objection.

4. Information, counselling, and support

4.1 Outlines

Existing guidance methods developed for the needs of specific target groups based on age, employment, socio-economic and/or migrant backgrounds can be integrated into the validation services. There is a plethora of different instruments that have been developed with EU funds and are freely accessible.²

Comprehensive information materials have to be available during phase 1. A contract and/or report on agreement (s) shows a mutual agreement of both the candidate and the counsellor on validation policies. It is assured that these are explicit procedures of the highest confidentiality (procedural standards on confidentiality and protection of privacy – data protection). The results of the trial are the exclusive property of the candidates.

Possibility to give feedback must be granted for the candidates. There is sufficient competent staff to provide counselling to actively support the candidates in maintaining their motivation during the validation process (e.g. by reminder messages, by telephoning when appointments have been missed, etc.).

There are sufficient digital planning documents and reports have to be available on the implementation of the validation process for candidates as well as employees.

4.2 Information and stakeholder involvement

Involvement of decision makers such as companies and NGOs is essential as they usually cover participation fees. Active public relations/information and promotional activities are indispensable when it comes to spreading information about validation. The opening hours of the responsible department have to correspond to the needs and expectations of the target groups.

² See <https://vince.eucen.eu/de/about-vince/> [28.02.2022].

4.3 Professional competences of validation practitioners

Confidence in validation also depends on the competence of the counsellors and examiners. The counsellors are needed at all stages of the validation process. Counsellors and examiners not only need to be well versed in validation procedures but are also required have “soft skills” such as social or intercultural skills. They must have knowledge the education system and certificates as well as the ability to formulate learning experiences as learning outcomes.

In any case, the clear separation of roles between counselling and testing is important to ensure the greatest possible objectivity and fairness.

4.4 Professionalization of Validation Experts (PROVE)

PROVE aims to contribute to the development of professional competences of staff involved in the validation of prior learning (VPL) through the creation of a competence development offer for validation professionals that can be connected across Europe. The competence model and the Self-Evaluation Tool developed in PROVE will give validation practitioners orientation about important competences for their validation practice. The Learning Tool Kit offers a variety of learning resources for this purpose through which validation experts will get access to high-quality learning and teaching materials for their professionalization that can be used as open educational resources (OER).

4.5 Quality management

Quality management in validation must be a systematic, continuous and integral part of the university's quality management.

Generally, four types of evaluation should be included. Firstly, an institutional self-evaluation and evaluation of the process by the candidates by means of feedback questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. An evaluation of validation procedures and results by experts as well as an evaluation of former candidates according to e. g. B. 6 months are the core content of Quality management. Lastly, there is regular independent external evaluation of the validation process with the involvement of external stakeholders with legitimate claims, e. g. by peer review.

5. Tools, EU initiatives and projects

5.1 Seven areas of action

The European Platform on Learning Mobility (EPLM) Framework of Action provides priority directions for the Platform of Stakeholders to contribute their competences, energy, and networking power towards the development of higher quality and more sustainable learning mobility for all in the European youth work field. The framework consists of 7 areas of action for the period from 2021 to 2030; in those areas the EPLM

aims to support the youth field in Europe, to build trust, to develop awareness, competences and benefits for all by connecting the sectors of practice, policy, research and needs of young people. Seven Areas of Action 2021–2030:

- “Bring Research Closer to practitioners, Young People and policymakers. Support knowledge-building and evidence-based policy
- Link to youth work and value-based education. Mobility as a more accessible tool for youth work at grass roots, promoting specific values
- Ensure quality and recognition. Ensure the mobility is fit for purpose. Link to competence frameworks and recognition of youth work achievements.
- Evaluation, learning transfer & community/personal impact. Measuring the difference a mobility project makes
- Informal learning & more flexible formats. Allowing for the unplanned, unintended or the unexpected.
- Digital learning mobility. Online and blended learning through digital tools
- Sustainability. Climate crisis, and other longer term thinking (social, cultural, economic levels)” (European Commission & Council of Europe, n.d.)

The EPLM highlights the importance of recognition of prior learning and more flexible learning paths ensuring diverse students to be part of the learning mobility projects, social inclusion impact and personal development. This must be integrated in each action area. For this purpose, the EPLM created and promoted two major tools: a Q-App and a Handbook on Quality in Learning Mobility. Due to the COVID-19 situation, the EPLM committed to meeting challenges regarding sustainability and digital learning mobility.

5.2 Pact for Skills

The European Commission launched the Pact for Skills in november 2020 as a tool for stakeholders that includes social and labour aspects toward green and digital transitions. The Pact for Skills is a shared engagement model for skills development in Europe and is a part of the European Skills Agenda.

The European Commission has invited companies, workers, national, regional, and local authorities, social partners, cross-industry and sectoral organisations, education and training providers, chambers of commerce and employment services to support the up-skilling and re-skilling people in Europe.

The Pact for Skills offers a variety of tools and approaches to increase the skills development. The Networking hub ensures support in finding partners and first meetings of the partnerships, linking with existing EU tools, e.g. Europa’s, Skills Panorama, EURES and European Network of Public Employment Services and to promote the activities of the Pact members. The Knowledge hub offers information about webinars, seminars and peer learning activities as updates on EU policies and instruments

and upcoming projects. The Guidance and resources hub grants access to information on relevant EU funding and guidance to identify financial possibilities. Exchange between the Pact members and national/regional authorities is facilitated.

5.3 Micro credentials

A micro-credential is proof of the learning outcomes achieved following a short learning experience. Learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards, proof is contained in a certified document that lists the name of the holder, the achieved learning outcomes, the assessment method, the awarding body and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards.

5.3.1 The main objective

The objective of the European approach to micro-credentials is to facilitate their validation, recognition, and portability, and to foster a larger uptake to support individual learners to gain and update their knowledge, skills, and competences in all subject areas, learning environments and career stages.

5.3.2 European vision for micro-credentials for 2030

European citizens will be able to start their learning pathways into and through higher education at any stage in their lifetime. Micro-credentials will provide learners with rich opportunities to diversify their learning and improve their education by taking shorter courses. They can be linked thematically and their alignment to standardized descriptors (e.g. for professional profiles, skills taxonomies, education level, type of evidence etc.) will ensure that they are equally understood and recognized by employers, educational establishments across sectors, and wider society. Through this, micro-credentials will play a major role in encouraging and realizing lifelong learning and a society of learning.

6. Learning mobility

The European Platform on Learning Mobility (EPLM) aims to create conditions for the development of high-quality and sustainable learning mobility for all in the youth field, and is working to pursue quality, impact, knowledge, inclusivity, participation, sustainability, visibility, and recognition of learning mobility (including blended or online) in non-formal and informal education and learning in Europe. Within the holistic approach to improve participation, access to rights, intercultural and intergenerational learning, inclusion, personal development, digital competences, transparency,

sustainability, and impact on the community, the EPLM created a Framework of Action.

The EPLM focuses on non-formal learning with links to informal learning as well as on the quality and recognition of learning outcomes ensuring that the outcomes are fit for purpose. Learning mobility in the non-formal context beyond the youth field includes all types of learning outcomes, knowledge, skills, and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. “It encompasses a wide variety of project formats and activities and can be implemented in informal or non-formal education settings” (European Commission & Council of Europe, n.d.).

Recently, valuable tools in recognition and validation have been developed and focus is given on facilitating more flexible learning pathways. These tools help to identify, document, and assess learners’ knowledge, skills and competences acquired during learning mobility, validating them, and making them visible.

Recognition tools support reflection on the experience, ensure high accessibility and enable credits obtained in the learning mobility to be recognized. The positive impact of learning mobility reflects, through Up-Skilling and Re-Skilling, the professional skills, enabling labour market integration, increasing intercultural skills, language skills and European identity.

6.1 Applying validation procedures in learning mobility projects

When applying the process of validation in mobility projects, it is very important to develop a proper validation methodology that fits the specific nature of the project, that considers the inclusion of people and undertakes the relevant type of learning activities. Furthermore, mutual trust and recognition are important to be established between all parties involved in the mobility. Another important step in this process is to ensure quality in mobility by providing guidelines and setting principles, standards, and indicators. Providing information and guidance are significant mechanisms for making the participants aware of their abilities and opportunities. The validation process is based on the needs of each partner involved in the mobility. The needs must be adjusted to each other so when the mobility starts, all partners know what learning outcomes are expected.

6.2 Virtual mobility, credentials, and common micro credential framework

During the COVID-19 crisis many fields of education reacted to the situation with emergency responses such as openness and collaborative approaches. Great innovation in digital services and pedagogical transformation created the flexibility/adaptability to reach diversity of people’s needs. But going online brings many challenges: access, digital confidence, as well as questions such as “how is the quality of international connection and learning maintained through online projects?”

The current situation showed the importance of committing to the Education 2030 Agenda and flexible learning pathways. Learning paths such as a hybrid flexible

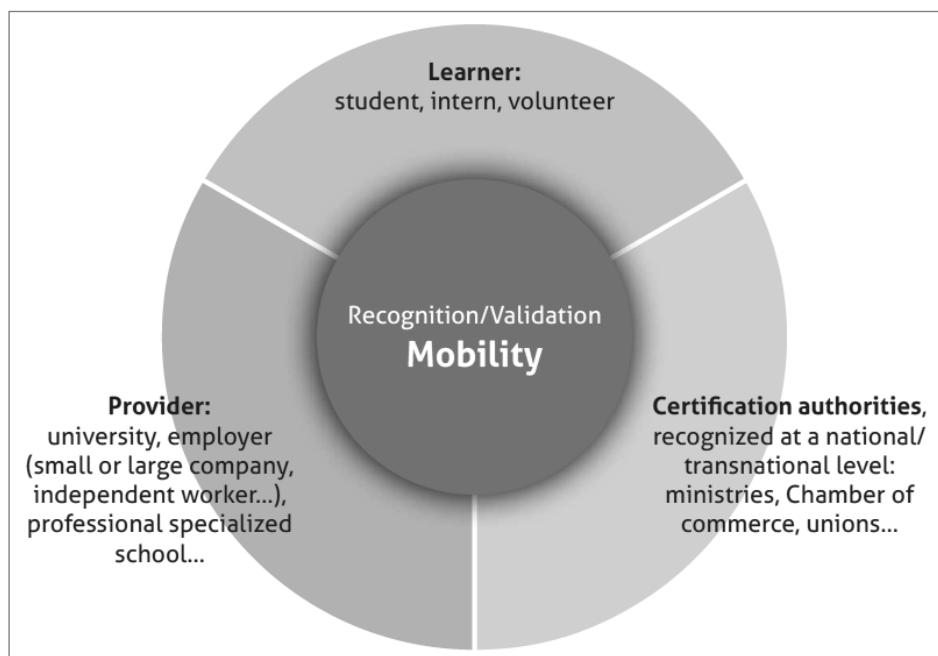


Fig. 4: The actors of mobility (Schoger & Patecka, 2013, p. 13)

learning framework consist of virtual mobility that could be a useful conceptual tool for current and future responses. Virtual mobility is the form of academic mobility that enables students to study abroad without physically travelling. To validate such a learning experience requires academic institutions to recognise this form of learning. The European approach to micro-credentials might further enable this new form of mobility.

7. Conclusion

Enabling re- and upskilling throughout life is of great importance to European universities and establishing a transparent, quality-assured and open education system that enables access to higher education for all groups remains a focus for institutions. Additionally, international cooperation ensures that both newly obtained micro credentials and informal or non-formal validated qualifications are recognised by a larger number of institutions which helps to not only increase access but to empower the learner and increase confidence in the validation process.

Procedures, methods, and tools to facilitate and assist in the validation of non-formal and informal learning as well as the general recognition of prior learning support re- and upskilling of the population on a wider level and aid in developing a mobile European Lifelong Learning culture. Comprehensive and transferable instruments and procedures for validation exist within Europe and both national and international projects are underway to refine and improve existing methods.

Validation itself must remain a holistic and comprehensive process with great transparency and internationally agreed-upon standards to guarantee confidence in the process which currently remains a challenge. Highlighting the benefits of existing programmes and raising awareness of established methods can aid in this process. While validation procedures have paved the way to a more inclusive approach to higher education and mobile lifelong learning within Europe, there is still a need to ensure these procedures are promoted nationally and internationally to enable learners to realise their potential.

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