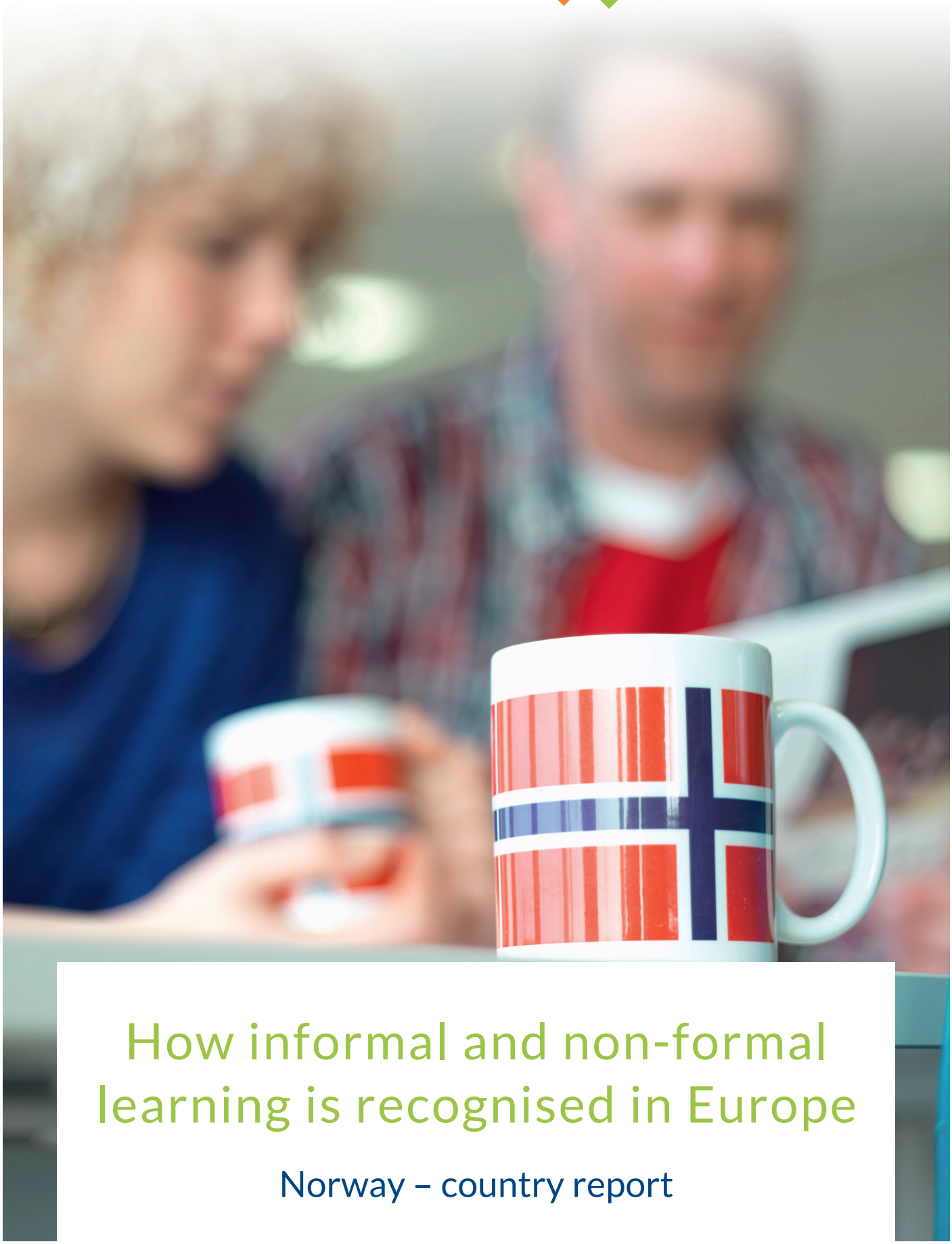
Competences for Europe



How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

Norway – country report

BertelsmannStiftung

How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

Norway – country report

Odd Bjørn Ure. Consultur.
Studies & Analyses

This country report was composed as part of a larger study on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The country reports of Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as well as the summary of the study both in English and German, and finally the complete publication (in German only) can be found at

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe.

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1 Initial situation

A State policy of lifelong learning has over the last 15 years designed procedures for recognizing non-formal and informal learning at all levels of education, including upper secondary education where the majority of formal vocational training takes place. These procedures are aligned with statutory rights to validation and recognizing of informal and non-formal learning in most cases carried out for free. This goes hand in hand with a judicialisation of learners' interaction with the education and training system, in the sense that statutory rights to (public) education and validation services have been a main issue in the definition and implementation of lifelong learning policies. These policies have contained experimentation for validation of prior learning in the labour market, the education and training system as well as the civil society. Validation of prior learning in the labour market is not widely researched; validation practices in firms are thus rather unknown. The clearest evidence in this regard is that validation tools developed during State reforms and programs seldom feed into the Human Resources Development (HRD) practices of Norwegian enterprises.
There are differences in validation procedures between educational levels and across societal sectors (read: labour market, the civil society and the education/training system); yet no deliberate public policy for making a very unified system that could disturb the bottom-up approaches of present validation practices.

2 Vocational training and informal learning in Norway: characteristics and concepts

The terminology used in Norway for describing the English-language notion of non-formal and informal learning is "Realkompetanse". It often refers to all types of prior learning – formal, non-formal and informal. Since the early 2000s, the term "Realkompetanse" has therefore been defined as the sum of competences acquired throughout formal education, paid and unpaid work as well as participation in civil society activities (Vox 2002). One consequence of this all-encompassing concept of "Realkompetanse", is that procedures for validating non-formal and informal competences may also include validation of learners' formal competences, for example pointed out in the recent guidelines for validation at the level of upper secondary education (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2013).
This peculiar operationalization of "Realkompetanse" has historical and systemic roots, of which two stand out:

- Education for everybody (in a unitary education system), which has been a widely shared policy goal since the process of national building in the 18th and 19th century. Later, systematic validation of competences acquired in a variety of learning situations fitted into a policy based on egalitarian and democratic values (Sakslind 2006).
- The slow evolution of an infrastructure of "local civic life" resulted in local control of education, community control and parents' strong influence on local schools. The very high appreciation of informal learning at home, at the workplace and in the community goes back to the epoch of nation building (Lauglo 2002). An ambitious State reform for lifelong learning, the Competence Reform launched in 1999, could therefore build on practices for validating learning outside the formal education system (Ure 2007).

2.1 Characteristics of Norwegian vocational training

After ten years of primary and lower secondary education, compulsory schooling ends at the age of 16 when the student can choose between

- Three years at upper secondary level in general education; or
- Four years in vocational training (i.e. two years vocational education at school and two years apprenticeship training in an enterprise).

Alongside attempts to equalize the status of the general and vocational programs and to shift between them, a 2005 educational reform tried to make the two tracks more distinct with a view to combat high dropout rates and to better guide hesitant students in their educational choices.
The normal route to gain a trade certificate is two years of school training, followed by two- year apprenticeship training in enterprises. This especially pertains to the large craft and industrial trades, and it is also here the majority of apprenticeships are found. In some newer trades, the vocational program might end after a third year of school training and no apprenticeship is offered during an additional year. The variety of apprenticeship in trades increased from six in the early 1950s to 200 six decades later (Høst 2008). During recent years, the number of recognized trades has oscillated around 200; as a few disappear and some new are established (for an overview see www.udir.no/Lareplaner/Finn-utdanningsprogram).
Traditional trades in industry increased sharply in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, new trades in industry (e.g. operators in the process industry) and in handicraft (e.g. waiter, cook, florist) appeared. Finally, the number of trades in the service sector rose during the 1990s; particularly in health and care trades where the apprenticeship system slowly gained roots, but without becoming the main route for entering these occupations. Within areas of the service sector like banking, an apprentice system has not been considered an alternative in Norway, comparable to e.g. Germany. In retailing, the recruitment of apprentices has been lower than the influx of youth and adults with other backgrounds, who are subsequently trained according to internal procedures of the company (Michelsen, Olsen and Høst 2014).

3 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: Concept, employment situation, further education behaviour

3.1 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: Concept and policy background

"Mismatch" problems related to scarcity of some vocational skills and abundant supply of other skills, are differently formulated in Norway than in Germany. The Norwegian labour market rapidly absorbs vocational qualifications at the level of Fachhochschule. Hence, there is no issue of reskilling people with qualifications at that level into apprenticeship contracts within sectors in urgent need of labour. Moreover, the Norwegian labour market administration (NAV) thinks differently from the definition of "formal Geringqualifizierte" in the Federal Employment Agency.

An interpretation of what "persons with low levels of formal qualification" could mean in a Norwegian context features three groups:

1. Adults with formal qualification below the level of upper secondary school who can claim their right to complete upper secondary education at this level; including validation of prior learning,
2. Early school leavers; the Norwegian debate centres on the young population constituting this heterogeneous group,
3. Employees in lack of basic reading, writing, digital and mathematical skills; this target group is presently the prioritized group of persons with low levels of formal qualification in Norway.

3.1.1 Adults with formal qualification below the level of upper secondary school

This is the target group of the validation procedures (1) Free of charge assessment of prior learning for adults with a statutory right to complete upper secondary education and (2) Experience-based trade certification presented below. This group was initially targeted in an extensive national lifelong learning reform (1999-2006), yet it soon turned out that there was not a very high demand for acquiring formal qualifications by completing upper secondary education and that other forms of continuing training were deemed more appropriate by this target group (Teige 2007). During recent years, adults' right to have their prior learning assessed as part of this statutory right for completing upper secondary level, has been claimed by a stable share of learners.

3.1.2 Early school leavers

The current discussion in Norway on validation of prior learning has seldom linked validation to the phenomenon of early school leaving (ESL), though early school leavers may benefit from existing validation procedures.

Norway scores high in OECD's comparisons of the average age of upper secondary candidates in vocational programs; 27 percent in Norway, below 23 percent for OECD as a whole, when measured five years after enrolment (OECD 2013). It should be noticed that compulsory education for Norwegian pupils lasts until the age of 16.

There is some concern in Norway that the panoply of catching-up opportunities offered free of charge, including validation procedures, contribute to the high dropout rate from Norwegian vocational (and general) education programs at upper secondary level. However, if dropout is not measured five years after enrolment, like in the OECD statistics, but according to age cohorts e.g. 21, 26 and 31; the dropout rate in upper secondary education becomes far less dramatic. This may justify a relabelling of the very problem, which rather could be called “delayed school completion”. (Barth 2014). One further argument for nuancing or even extending the OECD 5-year reference period used to elucidate early school leaving, is that some Norwegian vocational trajectories for obtaining trade certificates last longer than the standard 2+2 year apprenticeship training.
These nuances raise the question of whether it is pertinent to develop policy instruments for the early-school leavers who do not become socially excluded, but simply take up unskilled job positions and complete education at a later stage. One further consideration is that the transition from school to work is becoming more complex with several steps forth and back. This phenomenon is coupled to a Norwegian youth culture developed during a period without severe economic recessions, sustained by many well-off parents whose siblings have few worries about their future income and the financial implications of their educational choices. Seen from a macroeconomic angle, the costs for supporting the socially excluded, early school leavers are far higher than the societal costs of a delayed completion of compulsory education (Strøm 2014).

3.1.3 Employees who lack basic reading, writing, digital and mathematical skills

Worries about this target group is the closest one comes to a continuous discourse on people with low levels of formal qualifications in Norway. Priority is presently given to this target group because of the high number of people who lack such skills, estimated to nine percent of the total population. Ministerial policy documents claim that the target group has a skill level below a minimum which would allow them to function satisfactorily on job and in their social life (Government white paper), which is a concern for policymakers, employers as well as trade unions.
Nevertheless, the low unemployment rate and continuous labour shortage in some sectors, contribute to absorbing many persons with low levels of formal qualification into the labour market where they occupy low-skilled jobs. The labour market is less stratified in Norway than in Germany. Hence, in segments without strong apprenticeship traditions, Norwegian workers with a low level of basic skills may compete for jobs with those having trade certificates; such as in hotels, restaurants and other services industries.
The sectors of commerce and retail trade feature the highest number of employees with low levels of formal qualification without a trade certificate. Many of them are also engaged in accommodation, food and beverage service activities (Wiborg et al. 2011).
While building on experiences from previous national programs for lifelong learning (LLL), the “Programme for Basic Competences in Working Life” was launched in 2006. The target group of workers with low levels of formal qualification had not been sufficiently reached during earlier public initiatives. The point of departure of the new "Programme for Basic Competences in Working Life" is to link individuals' learning with their job. This has certain consequences for the operation of the program, in particular the institutional resources utilized to implement it; including learning resources and tools for charting competences. Such tools for testing and charting of competences are available on the web site of the host organization, Vox. This Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning has among others developed a tool labelled “Profiles for basic skills at work”, which has been introduced to schools, career centres and employment offices. The tool is increasingly used in a dialogue with these users (GHK 2010: 166).

The “Competence Goals for Basic Skills for Adults” establish national standards for reading and writing, mathematics, digital competence and oral communication. The competence goals are divided into three levels, which describe the advancing abilities and the intended learning outcomes for each of the basic skills (Vox 2013). These goals serve as guidelines for the implementation of the Programme for Basic Competences in Working Life. The goals are not formally integrated in Norwegian procedures for validating non-formal and informal learning, yet closely related to curricula of the formal education system.

From 2009, the Education Act has contained a statutory right to evaluation of prior learning at the level of primary school (up to 12 years of age). The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training has recently produced guidelines for the evaluation of prior learning at this school level[1]. Primary school training partly corresponds with the nature of the skills that learners involved in projects under the “Programme for Basic Competences in Working Life” can acquire. The new guidelines do not directly refer to the Competence Goals for Basic Skills for Adults, yet one intersection emerges when learners with low basic skills but considerable work practice that they wish to account for within apprenticeship training, ask for assessment of their prior learning experiences, for example with the aim to have their vocational training adapted to their specific background[2].

Trainers involved in projects under the Programme for Basic Competences in Working Life can make use of various tools for testing and charting the skill levels of adult learners in the fields of reading, writing, mathematics and computers. The institutional experiences and resources in the program host organization are also activated for this purpose, for example the abovementioned Competence Goals for Basic Skills for Adults.

The formality of liaising the competence goals mentioned above, with national schemes for validating non-formal and informal learning is not an issue of controversy. Moreover, this question has not been tabled during the evaluations of the program, which has been successful, - measured in the number of applications received and the ensuing involvement of learners with low levels of formal qualification in workplace learning (Proba 2012).

Whereas validation of learners with low levels of formal qualification below secondary education is not the main focus of the ongoing German study, validation procedures for Norwegian learners in lack of basic skills will not be further presented in this national report.

3.2 Further training behaviour of persons with low levels of formal qualification

Several studies have provided proof of the importance of informal learning pathways – both for persons with low levels of formal qualification and for the overall workforce. This is supported by data from the large-scale Learning Conditions Monitor revealing that non-formal and informal learning is the preferred form of learning at the level of the firm in the opinion of the employees and employers. Learners state that one motivating factor is project work or practical experiences, where relevance can be drawn from the daily work or at least from activities affecting fellow workers (Wiborg et al. 2011, Dæhlen and Nyen 2009).

[1] www.udir.no/Regelverk/Finn-regelverk-for-opplaring/Finn-regelverk-etter-tema/Voksne/Retningslinjer-for-realkompetansevurdering-i-grunnskoleopplaringen/

[2] All learners enrolled in formal education are entitled to receive education adapted to their individual needs. This right was introduced when the system of special schools for pupils with any kind of physical, mental or learning disability was abandoned, and replaced by a policy for creating an “inclusive school”.

4 Core elements of the validation of formal and non-formal learning

4.1 Legal basis

There are laws and regulations for assessment of prior learning in primary, upper secondary as well as higher education. In brief, validation practices of relevance for this report are regulated by the following laws:

- The 1952 Law on vocational training permitted individuals to pass a craft examination based on practical work experience, without having attended school training and gone through the apprenticeship period that would normally be required. This practice is now integrated in §3-5 of the Education Act.
- Statutory right to complete upper secondary education and free assessment of prior learning (Education Act, § 4A-3):

In 2000**,** an amendment to the Education Act gave adults born before 1978, and without completed upper secondary education, a statutory right to upper secondary education. This education should be tailored to their needs and based on an assessment of their informal and non-formal learning. Later amendments of the same act gave adults with the right to further education, a right to have their "Realkompetanse" documented, including when not seeking further education. Validation is now available to all adults aged over 25 and in practice even to those below 25, provided that the county authorities can raise sufficient financial resources for this.

The legislation presented above is summarized in the following table:

T*able 1: Summary table of the legal basis for validation of "Realkompetanse" at upper secondary level*

Legal title	Subject	Requirement	Scope
Education Act, §3-5	Experience-based trade certification	(Normally) five years of work experiences allowing to pass a trade/craft examination	National
Education Act, § 4A-3	Statutory right to assessment of prior learning for completing upper secondary education. Assessment of prior learning for getting a job.	Adults aged 25+, and in some cases below, with a statutory right to complete upper secondary education, can have their prior learning assessed for free. Free assessment also applies to unemployed people upon decision of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.	National

4.1.1 Variations in how the assessment procedures are implemented

Whereas the framework for validating prior learning is enacted by law, it has a nation-wide coverage for each educational level or type of institutions concerned. The way in which it is implemented varies between educational institutions and is highest in tertiary education, because institutions at this level exercise the highest level of autonomy. Once this legal framework enacted, the implementation of validation procedures is done through guidelines.

4.1.2 Permanent or test regulation

Most validation procedures are permanent in the sense they reside on national legislation, yet their origin was often trials, exploratory projects and other forms of experimentation. There are for the moment no procedures with project status. Particularly during the implementation of the 1999-2006 Competence Reform, which financed experimentation of lifelong learning in all societal fields, these trials allowed social actors to gain their own experiences, for example the third sector's Personal Competence Document, which however has seen a limited dissemination (Hawley and Ure 2010).
In addition, public authorities in charge of proposing validation guidelines have harvested from their own experimental projects; all leading to the guidelines now being introduced for every education level. The guidelines often accrue from testing and exploratory projects conducted in a few counties, for example between educational authorities at a county level in conjunction with local employment offices.

4.1.3 Relevance for the target group

Whether the most relevant approach to validation is to adopt statutory rights within a legal framework could be an open question. A strong judicialisation of (access to) validation services in the field of vocational education and lifelong learning, might constrain the mobilization of lower echelons of labour market stakeholders and the civil society in general. Hence, the initiative to move forward the validation agenda tends to remain in the hands of the welfare State. The direct relevance for the target groups is however reflected by the high number of people making use of the statutory rights to validation, which for vocational training at the level of upper secondary education is close to 40 percent. Moreover, the outreach of validation services to potential users has increased, partly due to the validation guidelines produced by educational authorities under the Ministry. These guidelines i.a. address the staff in charge of carrying out the validation procedures and methods. This staff has benefited from training and information exchange organized during the production and dissemination of the validation guidelines. The relevance for learners of the legislation seems to depend on a proper institutionalization of validation procedures and the range of support services.

4.2 Procedures and instruments

The practical procedures and instruments for recognizing formal and non-formal competences follow variations along educational levels and the ensuing legislative framework for validation. These preconditions frame the procedures and instruments that are in place at national level, in addition to the four validation phases set out in principle 2 of the European guidelines for validation (Council of the European Union 2012: 3):

1. Identification.
2. Documentation.
3. Assessment.
4. Certification

The agencies responsible for trials and experiments in educational and societal sectors, notably Vox and the Directorate of Education, have organized useful exchanges of experiences and information between staff in charge of validating applications for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The validation is measured against officially recognized curricula at all levels of education. The curricula are defined according to learning outcomes.

4.2.1 Binding procedures

Among the procedures mentioned above, the ones that stem from statutory rights rooted in legislation are binding in the sense that they involve the formal education system and can lead to formal qualifications.

4.2.1.1 Free of charge assessment of prior learning for adults with a statutory right to complete upper secondary education (Education Act, § 4A-3).

The regulations for validating adults' competences in view of access to upper secondary education, were amended in the autumn of 2013; pointing to clearer procedures for how the county administration should handle the applications. The amendments also regulate when the costs of validation are covered by the county administration, the employment services or the applicant.
The procedure consists of two instruments of which the first is the statutory right for adults to complete upper secondary education. After the introduction of this right there was no significant catching-up effect engendering a surge in the number of applications. Table 2 below shows that the total number of adult participants in upper secondary education aged 25+ now seem to be in a slight downward trend.

Table 2: Total number of participants in upper secondary education and training aged 25 or older (Source: Education Mirror 2013, 2014 from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training)

School year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
N	25,348	24,263	20,705	19,908	20,275	20,242

The second instrument of the binding procedure is adults' right to free-of-charge assessment of prior learning. When accounting for all programs offered at the level of upper secondary education, including the apprenticeship scheme, the share of adults who have their prior learning assessed has recently oscillated around 12 percent, as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Percent of all adults in upper secondary education having their prior learning assessed (source: The Education Mirror 2012; 2013 from the Norwegian Directorate of Education)

School year	2009/2010	2011/12	2012/13
Percent	14	11,5	13

This share is highest among adults taking vocational programs at the level of upper secondary education. Hence, close to 40 percent of those attending vocational programs have had their prior learning assessed, as shown in the table below:

Table 4: Percent of those taking vocational education programs having prior learning assessed (source: The Education Mirror 2012; 2013 from the Norwegian Directorate of education and training)

School year	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Percent	40	38	36

4.2.1.2 Experience-based trade certification

There are procedures within a legal framework for attaining formal qualifications without undergoing mandatory training courses. The Norwegian Education act, § 3-5, allows candidates for the experience-based trade certification to take a craft examination if they can prove practical work experience equivalent to 1,25 times the apprenticeship period of a learner who follows the normal 2+2 years trajectory. The latter implies attending 2 years of school training followed by a two-year apprenticeship period. In most cases, the work experiences should last at least five years. These candidates for the experience-based trade certification take the same final examination as apprentices.

Strictly speaking, §3.5 is not a procedure to recognize competences, but more of a practice for documenting competences than a validation procedure. Whereas documentation is one of the four phases of validation and given the fact that the § in question is widely considered a Norwegian example of validation of prior learning, we will however count it among the validation procedures. Seen over a period since 1998 and while accounting for vocational students of all age groups, the share of candidates admitted for experience-based trade certification has been quite stable around one third of all crafts examinations (Michelsen and Høst 2002, Høst 2012).

The county administration decides whether the work experiences claimed by the applicant are relevant for being admitted to a trade or craft examination. A closer examination of the instruments of this validation procedure reveals that alongside this approval of relevance, candidates for the experience-based trade certification have to pass a five-hour written exam to demonstrate that s/he has acquired competence aims equal to the curriculum for the chosen subject. This is a specific exam different from the final apprenticeship examination.
Nine recognized trades even demand one more exam before a candidate is admitted to a craft certificate examination. Among these count trades with the well-functioning apprenticeship practices and the strictest control of their labour market segment, such as lift installers, electricians and other trades in the field of energy, electricity and telecommunications.
There are in Norway no specific examination boards for assessing competences of workers who try to get a craft or apprenticeship certificate based on this alternative route. Hence, their competences are assessed by the same examination boards as for vocational students who follow the traditional trajectory of 2 years at school + 2 years' work placement. Nevertheless, candidates for the experience-based trade certification can ask to carry out the practical part of their final craft examination at their own workplace.

In addition to this opportunity to situate the examination in an environment that these learners know well, the assessment standards of the examination boards is important for understanding the nature of this alternative route to craft certificates. In a study of how examination boards for vocational education are functioning, Deichman-Sørensen et al. (2011) identified a subtle manoeuvring between written standards set by the official curricula and – on the other hand – more tacit standards on what an apprentice or candidate is expected to know and exercise in each trade. Transferred to the candidates for the experience-based trade certification, this means that how such vocational expectations are transmitted by the examination boards and expressed in the actual examination, sheds light on to what extent workplace experiences are being assessed. It should also be noticed that social partner organizations are not in favour of replacing the exams (and general rules) for admittance to experience-based trade certification by very liberal procedures for validating prior learning.

The number of adult participants in upper secondary education and training, aged 25+, who each year are admitted to various learning trajectories, is seen in the table below.

Table 5: Participants in upper secondary education and training aged 25 or older (source: Education Mirror 2013, 2014 from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training)

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Apprentices and training candidates	4,766	4,864	4,610	4,247	4,026	4,054
Candidates for experience-based trade certification	5,865	6,456	6,649	6,570	7,402	6,760
Participants in school	14,717	12,943	9,446	9,091	8,847	9,428
Total	25,348	24,263	20,705	19,908	20,275	20,242

For the chosen age group, the table shows that the number of candidates admitted for experience-based trade certification is higher than for candidates going through standard apprenticeship training. The share of candidates for experience-based trade certification as a percentage of the total number of participants aged 25+ (most of them have passed exams at the level of lower upper secondary education), has historically varied between 23 percent and 37 percent. What in the table above called "participants in schools", refers to those following a trajectory of general education (The "statistics bank" of Statistics Norway[3]).

Learners following the alternative route to craft examinations (experience-based trade certification) are in average 10 years older than those embarked on the main (apprenticeship) route. This pattern especially applies to apprentices in the health and care sector, whose average age when obtaining their certificates based on non-formal and informal learning is 33. One illustration of how important the experience-based trade certification is for the health and care sector, is the 2009 statistics from Oslo, showing that 63 percent of those obtaining a health and care trade certificate had followed this alternative route (Vox Mirror 2009).

Apprentices in the service and transport sectors are almost equally old (31) when receiving their certificates. These sectors contain many new or newly redefined trades. In them, it is deemed important to provide the many experienced, non-certified workers with a formal certificate. In this way, the apprenticeship system can become more firmly rooted in the services sector; a system that historically was shaped in handicraft and industry. Consequently, the average age of apprentices in the trade of electricians who have their non-formal and informal competences approved is much lower (23 years). This is a traditional trade with a well-defined trajectory of dual training. The second lowest average age for receiving a trade certificate is found in the study program "design and handicraft" (The 'statistics bank' of Statistics Norway).

[3] www.ssb.no/statistikkbanken

4.2.1.3 Validation of work experiences acquired abroad

With reference to the situation in Germany, it is worth observing that Norway has no equivalent to the German act for „The Assessment and Validation of Professional Qualifications“[4].
Below the level of higher education, the assessment of non-formal and informal competences is more centralized, in the sense that procedures for assessing prior learning are not defined by each educational institution. Instead, national bodies like the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) may decide that, e.g., immigrants who cannot provide enough documentation for their skill level, can go through a vocational testing in order to assess their prior learning. Hence, if a local employment office considers the assessment necessary for getting immigrants and other job seekers a job, the assessment of prior learning is carried out for free (Hawley and Ure 2010) and may lead to formal qualifications.
At upper secondary level 3 (the third year of upper secondary education), there is no general scheme for the recognition of vocational education and training from foreign countries. Neither is there a national scheme of recognition of foreign work experience for those who, for example, wish to present themselves as candidates for experience-based trade certification. Upon application, the County Governor may however produce an assessment of whether the applicant's foreign vocational training can be considered equal to a corresponding Norwegian vocational training. It is very much to the discretion of each County Governor, whose task is to supervise upper secondary education, whether s/he gives a green light for educational services to assist the applicants in obtaining a comparison of their foreign vocational training with Norwegian standards. Moreover, County Governors are not obliged to assess requests for obtaining such comparisons (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2014). For these reasons, the present practices in recognizing vocational education and training from foreign countries are not structured enough to clearly classify them as a binding procedure, though some practices point in this direction.

4.2.2 Non-binding procedures

4.2.2.1 Competence assessment carried out in enterprises

The closest one comes to non-binding procedures for validation of prior learning is the competence assessment carried out in enterprises, according to their internal procedures for HRD and staff recruitment. Moreover, the autonomy of social partners implies that validation in the labour market is less legally regulated.
As part of the national Validation Project (1999-2002), which moved forward a LLL reform, Vox and social partner organizations developed a 'Competence Card' to be used in enterprises for describing learning at work. This tool is still available from the Vox website, though seldom used. However, it serves as a general template for those wanting to develop their own tools. A database version of the same tool was later developed for small and medium sized companies and its source code was published, alongside an information package containing advice of how to chart staff competences. This was followed by examples presenting employers' and employees' views on successful skills analyses (Alfsen and Hernes 2011). Norwegian social partners and public authorities have instigated the dissemination of such instruments, including the first step towards a possible standardization of them. The limited use of this tool and the material enclosed to it, has raised questions about the

[4] Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Feststellung und Anerkennung im Ausland erworbener Berufsqualifikationen

correct approach for developing and disseminating validation instruments useful in a labour market context (cf. Hawley, Ure 2010).
It is unclear why systematic attempts to formalize validation methods applied in the labour market, were met with limited enthusiasm and had few long-term effects. Part of the answer might be found in a recent survey revealing that employers tend to understand validation of prior learning as a right primarily affecting individual learners; while the social partners perceive validation as a procedure confined to the formal education system (Damvad 2013).

Another report addressing this topic suggests that the origin of enterprises' validation tools and practices seems to be corporate HRD strategies rooted in broader management strategies for endowing the workforce with certain skills and competences (Brandt et al. 2012). Hence, jointly developed validation tools during public programs and State reforms do not feed (directly) into HRD practices in enterprises.

Moreover, a study on formal learning in small and medium sized companies concluded that enterprises are rather conscious about the value of formal exams and diplomas. Such formal proofs were appreciated by the interviewed managers as well as employees. However, both groups of respondents adopted a very general view on all kind of in-house competences, without attaching any exclusivity to formal education (Ure 2010). This is perhaps no surprise in a society that traditionally has highly estimated non-formal learning and where formal certificates and academic diplomas - contrary to more hierarchical societies - are modestly used as a social distinction; and consequently do not decisively forge social identities (cf. R. Sakslind 2006, O. Skarpenes 2007).

Another example of a non-binding validation instrument, as part of the competence assessment carried out by enterprises, is the certification of employees in accordance with national and international standards. The background is that among Norwegian workers in private enterprises, employees in the oil, power supply and mining industries receive most formal continuing training (Dæhlen and Nyen 2009b:15). When measuring the participation of workers from these sectors in non-formal training, they even outnumber the share of Norwegian employees in public enterprises who take part in such training (ibid: 22). A likely explanation of these statistics is that the tight security measures in the oil and gas sector require much training that leads to certification in accordance with ISO. However, few of these certificates count as formal training.

In the autumn of 2013, the government therefore nominated a commission ("Utvalg om kompetanser utenfor det formelle utdanningssystemet") to look into the possibility of including non-formal learning in the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and its triad of Knowledge-Skills-Competences (KSC). Its mandate was to analyse the provision of competences acquired outside the formal education system; and not the KSC held by individual learners who may ask to have their prior learning validated. The implications of the commission report are, however expected, to shed light on labour market conditions for appreciating non-formal learning. There is notably a difference between certification of work in the public sector, which tends to make use of the education system for this purpose; while less certification of competences for the private sector is structured through educational institutions. The commission was not able to agree on recommendations to the Ministry and delivered a dual report in the spring of 2015. One issue of contention was the pertinence of introducing four types of qualifications (*major, minor, special purpose and supplemental)* from the Irish NQF in the Norwegian framework with a view to appreciate non-formal learning. One faction argued that this modification of the NQF would better capture qualifications gained in a labour market context, - while the other faction found that, with some smaller adjustments, the present NQF will be apt to

appreciate non-formal qualifications at all eight levels. The commission members who refuted the Irish four-fold addendum, laconically wrote that: «If there is a political wish to enlarge the scope of the Norwegian Qualification Framework, needs of the labour market should guide how this will be done» (page 49). After these divided recommendations, the Ministry now has to decide how to go ahead with the NQF, while considering that the fear of splitting qualifications too much was one underlying premise for the contention within the commission. The issue of holistic vs. partial qualifications is further discussed in section 5.1. below.

4.2.2.2 Validation supported by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration

This validation procedure contains many instruments and most of them do not lead to formal qualifications. However, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) also pays for validation of job seekers' experiences with a view to, i.a., attend ordinary education and document prior learning in CVs. NAV is also obliged to assist in defining "adapted qualification trajectories" for each jobseeker.

The majority of validation instruments support job seekers who have the right to go through assessment facilitating their inclusion in the labour market. This right includes a mapping and clarification of prior learning, work experiences and even health conditions; all to ensure that optimal assistance is provided. When relevant, a 'work ability assessment' is carried out to see if additional support is needed, for example individual follow-up. The main approach of NAV is to assist in the preparation of a well-targeted "activity plan" for the client.

In addition to the instruments pointing to formal qualifications mentioned above, an activity plan can include 'self-help' activities, comprehensive career guidance from the career centres and various assistance to jobseekers when they apply for a new job.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) is responsible for information and guidance in the institutions under its responsibility, notably municipal unemployment centres; but the latter are dependent on input from the education sector in matters of validation. Hence, NAV might pay for the validation of a job seeker's non-formal and informal competences; yet the actual assessment of these competences is often carried out by validation services under the auspices of educational authorities.

4.3 Financial structures

The general financial rule in matters of vocational training is that the 19 County Administrations ("fylkeskommuner") receive a framework grant from the State for the organization of upper secondary education, including apprenticeship training. There are no earmarked funds for validation, which is integrated in the panoply of services offered by the education system. Hence, the costs of validation is covered by the educational budget of each county, insofar as the candidates have the right to education and validation at the level of upper secondary education. The funding allocated to validation therefore varies between the counties because they have the autonomy to manage their own money, and partly shift funds between budget lines. No information on the costs associated with validation is collected at national level (Hawley and Ure 2010).

The application for experience-based trade certification costs €100 and the two written exams that the applicant may be obliged to pass before the final trade examination, respectively cost €50 and €100.

4.3.1 Free-of-charge procedures

The statutory rights to validation imply that regulated entitlement to funding is based on public money. Validation services are offered for free to learners who qualify for these rights (Hawley and Ure 2010). Validation of informal and non-formal learning related to upper secondary education is free for the following groups:

- People with a statutory right to complete their education from primary school to upper secondary education and training (costs are normally borne by county councils);
- People who are unable to work for reasons of disability (costs are borne by the Labour and Welfare Service);
- People having signed a "jobseeker's agreement" with the Labour and Welfare Service can under some circumstances have their prior learning experiences assessed for free. One precondition is that the employment office deems the assessment necessary for (re-)integrating the worker in the labour market.

4.3.2 Commercial procedures

Private providers of Human Resources Development rarely offer services for assessing or validating prior learning, and there is no evidence that validation is often integrated in other services they deliver. The fact that there are public services for career guidance may reduce the private market for individual career planning, thus probably also constraining the development of private validation services. Validation integrated in firms' recruitment procedures, and in their practices for Human Resources Development, is financed privately.

4.3.3 Public vs. private financing of the procedures

The many statutory rights to free validation services paid by public administrations render private financing a rare phenomenon. For individuals not admitted to free validation services, the price of a validation can range from €120-300 for an academic subject and close to €300 for a vocational subject, while the price for 'vocational testing' may reach €1,800. The fees charged are decided at a county level based on the costs incurred in delivering validation, more specifically the average length of a validation process for a specific qualification (Hawley and Ure 2010).

4.3.4 Incurred costs

No estimations of such costs can be identified, with the only exception that costs of admitting a university student on the basis of validated prior learning is said to be higher than for students with formal qualifications. The reason should be that the assessment of prior learning demands more resources than for applications with standard documentation and diplomas. Higher education representatives, also representing professional education, estimated the administrative costs to be from double to ten times higher than for students with formal qualifications (OECD 2008).

4.3.5 Awareness and relevance for the target group

Given that many target groups enjoy statutory rights to have their prior learning validated and in view of the fact that this validation is often carried out for free, there is no apparent lack of appropriate financing of learners' (rare) expenses on validation.
The bottleneck rather seems to lie in the next step after having gone through a validation process, namely access to vocational training leading to a trade certificate. Whereas some counties are in lack of money or do not give priority to enrolling adult learners wishing to attend upper secondary education, adults are sometimes faced with waiting lists for exercising their right to complete education at this level (Hawley and Ure 2010).

4.4 Institutionalization

Overall, the main stakeholders are the social partners as well as public education and labour market services. At an enterprise level, those in charge of recruitment, training and Human Resources Development are only loosely coupled to the institutionalized framework for validation of prior learning. In this subchapter we look first into structures set up by public authorities, notably educational and labour market services. Afterwards, we address the institutionalization of stakeholder involvement in the form of social partner agreements on labour market regulations, and similar agreements on wage conditions. Consequences for institutionalization accruing from a clear sectorial approach to quality assurance of Norwegian validation practices, are separately discussed in a section on prospects of validation, which is situated at the very end of this national report.

4.4.1 Main structures and establishment of competent authorities for validation

Two institutional bodies under the Ministry of Education and Research are strongly involved in implementing national validation procedures. The Directorate is delegated some responsibilities from the Ministry for interpreting the national legislation, while Vox is more of an advisory body for the validation practitioners in the education and training system as well as for the Ministry.
The Directorate for Education and Training bears the responsibility for the governance of primary and secondary education at national and regional level. This responsibility also encompasses training for adults at these educational levels. Within this area of responsibility, the Directorate is in charge of documentation and validation of non-formal and informal learning. For this purpose, the Directorate has i.a. regular contacts with County education authorities and County Governors. The latter represent the State in each county and i.a. supervise the provision of upper secondary education.

Vox is the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning whose responsibility is to maintain a national overview of validation of non-formal and informal learning for all educational levels, including those levels not covered by the Directorate of Education and Training, such as tertiary vocational education and higher education. Vox' contacts with stakeholders is normally regulated by setting up reference groups to support specific validation projects, e.g. the development of guidelines for validation carried out by higher education institutions; yet the agency does not lean on permanent reference groups.

The county administrations in Norway have set up Assessment Centres for validation of prior learning in upper secondary education. In addition, there are 15 Career Guidance Centres at a county level. Alongside traditional career guidance, the latter centres have the task of informing learners about opportunities to go through validation of previous learning experiences. Both types of centres form part of the institutional framework of validation, to which one institution should be added, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). This service assists jobseekers when applying for a job, for example by guiding them on how to document prior learning in CVs and in defining 'adapted qualification trajectories' for each job seeker. During this process, NAV can decide that a jobseeker does not have to pay for assessment of prior learning experiences.

4.4.2 Wage agreements and social partner co-operation

The 1999-2006 Lifelong Learning reform ("Kompetansereformen") provided Norway with an advanced framework of individual rights, including those affecting validation of prior learning. This process put lifelong learning and Norwegian validation schemes on a judicial path guaranteed by the State (Ure 2007). While judicialisation of politics has been widely debated in Norway and elsewhere (Østerud et al. 2003), the topic of judicialisation has scarcely been discussed in the specific area of educational policy.

One negative implication of judicialisation could be that the involvement of stakeholders, notably social partners, in upholding and developing validation schemes remains low, such as observed for lifelong learning in general (Hagen and Skule 2007; Teige 2007; Ure 2007). Hence, the lower echelons of the social partners were only active during a short period of the 1999-2002 validation project and the overall Lifelong Learning reform (Bowman 2005; Payne 2005; Ure 2007). Later, studies of validation of prior learning in sectors such as the municipal labour market, confirm a low interest in having validation high on the social dialogue agenda (Tobiassen et al. 2008). One exception from this pattern is the way in which charting of employees' entire competences are used as one criterion for decisions on who to shelter from staff downsizing in times of recession (Teige 2007). Whereas trade unions and management representatives often negotiate on these decisions, validation of prior learning then implicitly emerges in the social dialogue and various validation tools start to demonstrate their applicability.

Alongside the legislative institutionalization described at the beginning of this chapter, inclusion of validation schemes in Basic Agreements between the social partners exemplifies how validation of prior learning is embedded in institutional structures. Hence, from the early 1990s, paragraphs on skills development were added to Basic Agreements in all economic sectors. These paragraphs i.a. outline annual stocktaking of competences and set out that employers are obliged to pay for continuing training in response to in-company needs. A new clause was added to the agreements in 2006, requesting employers to have a system for documentation of employees' experiences, included courses and practice related to work conditions.

When the Basic Agreement between the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry (NHO) and the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) was renewed for the period 2009-2013, a clause was added stating that:

"It is important that the enterprise has a system for documenting the individual's experience, courses and practice related to the employment relationship".

There are no evaluations available of how these new paragraphs are used, in particular the recent clause on documentation of experiences. However, one example shows some impact from validation paragraphs in social partner agreements on wage negotiations. The background was that the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities („Kommunenes Sentralforbund"), which is the

employers' association and interest organization for public enterprises, agreed a national agreement with the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees. Consequently, in the east-Norwegian city of Halden, an electronic tool for recording employees' learning and achievements was first introduced in 2009 and revised two years later. For municipal employees in Halden, proof of participation in one-year full-time formal learning is rewarded with a wage increase of 2.720 Euro, while non-formal learning adds 680 Euro to the annual salary (Hawley and Ure 2010).
Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, has presently several ongoing publicly funded projects to raise awareness of competence development amongst social partner representatives at the workplace. The projects notably try to support Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), similar to the role played by ULRs in the UK. In concrete terms, regional training courses are held for union representatives so that they become facilitators of learning (Vox 2014a). Among the "learning targets" of a Norwegian ULR are to (Landsorganisasjonen i Norge 2010):

- Explain pedagogical principles on learning, assessment of "realkompetanse" and competence development
- Advise an employee throughout a process of validating "realkompetanse".

4.4.3 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

Validation of non-formal and informal competences takes place at the intersection between institutions belonging to the labour market and the education and training system. A further institutionalization of validation in order to improve Norwegian procedures and practices benefiting learners therefore needs to be situated both in public structures and structures set up by social partners. Validation is partly integrated in Norwegian industrial relations; both in agreements regulating wage negotiations and agreements for co-decisions at an enterprise level. Norway is however at an early stage in this regard; and there are so far few signs that the institutionalization of validation in the social dialogue is profoundly changing HRD practices in enterprises.
The division of responsibilities for validation between public agencies or bodies is rather clear. The classical tensions between ministries for education vs. labour market are in Norway not acute in matters of validation. Hence, the institutionalization of validation seems to have positively affected public validation services under the responsibility of each ministry. The way in which procedures and practices for validation of prior learning is intertwined in organized interests and State structures, suggests that there is no one-single-approach to validation. While accounting for the corporative character of Norway's labour market and its training institutions, the co-existence of many approaches to validation seems inevitable and does not seem to hamper individual learners' access to validation services.

4.5 Support structures

We will shed light on the support structures by looking at the validation centres and career guidance centres set up to support learners who ask to have their prior learning assessed. We also look into the public agencies in charge of these centres, while addressing the question of how validation services can be further professionalized by means of staff training. Finally, we present some statistics on the awareness of validation procedures among Norwegian managers.

The support structures are upheld by the public agencies involved in validation procedures, notably Vox and the Directorate of Education and training. The latter works closely with the county administrations in Norway that have set up Assessment Centres for validation of prior learning in upper secondary education, including for apprenticeship training. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) also upholds the support structures, i.a. when collaborating with county administrations for setting up Career Guidance Centres that contribute to informing learners about validation services.

4.5.1 Centres for assessment of prior learning and career guidance

One single assessment centre for validation of prior learning in upper secondary education may cover several municipalities and is often situated at upper secondary schools or in public adult education centres. The assessment centres provide information, guidance and help with the process of validating a learner's prior learning. This is mainly delivered to individual learners, although group sessions may be held at the start of the process.

In order to support a learner to choose the right curriculum to apply for, information on learning trajectories is provided at the start of a validation process. Depending on the resources available at each assessment centre, guidance may also be provided during the validation process; for example on how to document competences or how to collect documentation from earlier job positions. Guidance is generally provided at the end of the process, thus enabling the candidate to identify further education or training needs. With a view to reduce costs, centres may choose to provide the guidance by telephone or internet (Hawley and Ure 2010).

The regional education authorities are responsible for quality assurance of the assessment procedures, including the training of assessors. Courses and seminars for these assessors are delivered annually and inexperienced assessors are also given mentoring support. Subsequent to this training, assessors are registered on a list at the regional assessment centre (Christensen 2013). Some counties have arranged professional development courses for assessors in cooperation with local higher education institutions (Vox 2011).

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and the county education authorities have concluded agreements to ensure targeted cooperation both on a county level (planning) and practical collaboration on a local level. This collaboration has i.a. led to the setting-up of partnerships for career guidance in 18 counties, embodied in Career Guidance Centres whose task i.a. is to guide learners who want to have their prior learning assessed. These agreements should enable the staff to better assist students with low levels of formal qualification, workers or unemployed who want to complete training and increase their job opportunities.

4.5.2 Dissemination of information about validation procedures

The rather integrated services provided by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and educational authorities, particularly at upper secondary level, seem primarily targeted at individual learners. If validation of primary learning is meant to be a commonly shared tool, the results from a recent survey of Norwegian enterprises jump to the eyes (Damvad 2013). Among the managers answering this survey, 75 percent did not know of the validation schemes while only 17 percent stated that they so did. In the latter group of respondents, half of them said that their employees to a little degree, or not at all, were making use of validation schemes. More public than private enterprises were aware of the opportunities of validation. This confirms statistics over years published in the Learning Conditions Monitor, showing that public employees receive more continuing training than most workers in the private sector; and that the upskilling of public employees is more often delivered by providers of formal education (cf. Dæhlen and Nyen 2009a; Wiborg et al. 2011).

4.5.3 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

The support structures have developed information and consultation services able to reach out to persons interested in having their prior learning assessed; with the aim of being reintegrated in the labour market, returning to education and training or changing jobs. The support to learners is potentially strengthened from linking the validation services to career guidance; yet the combined support structures have not functioned long enough to allow for a thorough evaluation of how useful they in practice are for the learners.

5 Education policy positions

Norway has had no systematic discussion on how validation of non-formal and informal is situated in the overall education and training policy. The reason for this might be found in the deep historical roots for appreciating (in both senses of the verb) non-formal and informal learning. This consensus may hamper clear educational positions beyond the general positive attitude towards validation practices. However, a few debates have emerged thereby hinting at the stance of some stakeholders, particularly the overall position of apprenticeship training and how validation practices are affected by transformations of vocational education. The debate exposed below concerns experimentation in organizing vocational training into smaller modules, thereby offering partial qualifications at a lower level than the apprenticeship training leading to trade certificates.

5.1 The Certificate of Practice Scheme - partial qualifications as a stepping-stone or the end of an educational trajectory?

Similar to what observed in the country report on Germany, some Norwegian stakeholders are reluctant to organizing training into smaller modules (read: partial qualifications).
One example is the contention around the Certificate of Practice Scheme (Praksisbrevordningen). This is a training program lasting for two years, which allows candidates to work in a firm four days a week, while learning general subjects at school during the fifth day. After obtaining such a certificate of practice, these candidates could apply for an apprenticeship or a job.
From the outset, there was however some ambiguity around the aim of this experiment and stakeholders had diverging views on this certificate of partial qualifications (Höst 2011). Through the implementation of this scheme, its final aim partially shifted and the issued certificates were gradually considered more of a building block towards a full craft or journeyman's certificate; rather than a goal in itself, as was originally intended. These ambiguities were formulated as the point of departure for evaluations of this scheme (cf. Höst 2011). The analyses concentrated on whether the Certificate of Practice Scheme should be considered:

- A distinct alternative to the Craft and Journeyman's Certificate, but of a lower level;
- An alternative path towards the Craft and Journeyman's Certificate;
- A new scheme solving the drop-out problem while trying to operate closely to the field of work.

The certificate of practice scheme started as an exploratory project in three counties, two of them with a developed enterprise culture sustained by trades that traditionally hire many apprentices. In these counties, the established dual training structures of the labour market tended to redefine the Certificate of Practice Scheme to become one step in a trajectory leading to a craft certificate (cf. Höst 2011).
Another researcher evaluated the implementation of the scheme in Akershus, the third county involved in the trial (Markussen 2014). This county maintained the original idea of a lighter educational trajectory; and claimed that many students enrolled in the exploratory scheme had low chances of succeeding if they were obliged to follow a normal apprenticeship trajectory (two years of school and two years of work practice). The pilot projects in this county therefore concentrated on getting the candidates through to the certificate of practice after two years.

The major trade union for teachers (Union of Education Norway) and the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) emphasized that the pilot scheme should be a special offer for those with specific needs, but not a scheme for large cohorts of young people. In a swiping article, published in the largest Norwegian newspaper (Aftenposten, 28.10.2010), the two trade unions warned against offering a permanent, light trajectory with lower ambitions for obtaining an apprenticeship certificate. Inside the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, the resistance against a light version of an apprenticeship certificate was hardest among trades that dominate their labour market segment, such as electricians and elevator installers. It should be noted that training for certificates in these trades, contain a solid portion of theory, which partly explains why the Certificate of Practice Scheme has not gained ground in such trades.

When trade unions were assured that the pilot scheme of two-year vocational training would not be established as an alternative to a normal 2+2 years trade certificate, the discussion calmed down and the new scheme now seems accepted as a first step towards a final craft examination (Høst 2011). The Norwegian State Secretary for Education announced by summer 2014 that the pilot scheme would probably become permanent from the autumn of 2016[5]. If the social partners, including labour unions organizing the most traditional trades with the longest experiences of apprenticeship training, in the end will agree with the detailed instruments of a permanent scheme for partial qualifications, the validation procedure could be labelled binding.

The debate reveals diverging views on the status of vocational certificates as an integral body of competences. Indirectly, this debate also sheds light on the appreciation of non-formal and informal competences. There were fears that certificates of partial qualifications could undermine efforts to raise the status of vocational education at a pair with general education. Along this line of reasoning, when choosing study programs at the level of upper secondary education, the vocational trajectories should not be considered an easy way to obtain a final exam. Moreover, vocational theory forms part of any vocational program and, as demonstrated for example in the field of Computer Aided Manufacturing, requires a considerable level of abstraction (Berner 2009; Skjærvik 2014).

It should be noticed that in order to reduce the high number of dropouts in vocational programs in upper secondary schools, the theoretical subjects in Norwegian vocational programs may be revised. This will for example lead to teaching a *vocational* vocabulary of English and *practical* mathematics linked to work situations (NOU 2014: 7).

[5] Interview in the daily newspaper *Klassekampen*, 27.08.2014.

6 Summary and prospects

6.1 Summary: The status of of informal and non-formal learning

The legal framework of statutory rights for individuals to have their non-formal and informal learning assessed, in most cases for free, reflects a strategy of securing individual rights in the legislation in order to make them permanent. Often such processes of judicialisation have been supported by all social partners; thus nurturing theories about a Norwegian societal model. One possible disadvantage of embedding validation procedures into individual rights guaranteed by the State is that the mobilization of stakeholders, like social partners and NGOs, is reduced and too much trust is put into the public will of the Welfare State. This might partly explain why validation procedures and continuing training has not caught the attention of rank-and-file members of trade unions over a long period.

Validation procedures rooted in statutory rights calling on the formal education system can be labelled binding. Validation is partly integrated in Norwegian industrial relations; both in agreements regulating wage negotiations and agreements for co-decisions in enterprises. Norway is however at an early stage in this regard; and there are so far few signs that the institutionalization of validation into the social dialogue is profoundly changing HRD practices in enterprises.

Statistics on the number of learners making use of validation procedures, suggest a rather stable and high number over time. During the recent years, close to 40 percent of those attending vocational programs at upper secondary level have had their prior learning assessed.
Validation guidelines produced by agencies under the Ministry of Education have equipped practitioners of validation with better instruments. Staff in charge of carrying out the validation procedures and methods, has also benefited from training and information exchange organized during the production and dissemination of these guidelines. The many approaches to validation living side by side do not seem to hamper individual learners' access to validation services.

The financing of learners' access to validation procedures is linked to the statutory rights. Hence, individuals only rarely have to pay for validation. The bottleneck rather seems to lie in adults' access to vocational training leading to a trade certificate because there may be waiting lists for exercising the right to complete education at this level.

Most support structures are public and there are information and consultation services addressing persons interested in having their prior learning assessed. In most cases, these services aim to reintegrate people in the labour market, assist them to return to education and training or to change jobs. Learners can potentially benefit from linking the validation services to career guidance; yet the support structures have not functioned long enough to allow for a thorough evaluation of how useful they in practice are for the learners.

6.2 Prospects: A one-off national validation system or several sectorial approaches?

The prospects of Norwegian validation schemes can to some extent be summarized in such a question. A more precise question is how the present sector-wise mechanisms for quality assurance of validation schemes will respond to pressure for more integrated quality control. The relevance of formulating these questions partly stems from the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
We will first enlarge on aspects accruing from the Council recommendation (2012), also signed up by the non-EU member state Norway. One specific recommendation is to promote: "[…] coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors, as well as between those in other relevant policy areas".

Like in most modern economies, the education and training system and the labour market constitute in Norway two societal sectors attached to different ministries. Whereas validation practices cut across these societal sectors and their ministerial frameworks, administrative structures that support validation practices cannot only pursue their standard operating procedures.
One effort contributing to overcome administrative divisions is a central cooperation agreement, signed in 2007 between the Ministry of Labour and the employers' association and interest organization for public enterprises (KS). The agreement aims to spur the collaboration between the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and the county administrations in matters of education and training (Alfsen and Hagen 2008).

This collaboration has i.a. led to the setting-up of partnerships for career guidance in 18 counties, of which 16 are rooted in signed agreements. The nucleus of these partnerships are NAV and the county administration ("fylkeskommunen"), while the other partners tend to vary in number and origin. Most partnerships have established Career Guidance Centres and there are now such centres in 15 of Norway's 19 counties. The number of such centres in each county varies and their target groups and panoply of services also differ (Vox 2014b).
These centres make use of a variety of methods and tools to support the career dialogue with unemployed people and other learners, for example by informing them about how to have their previous learning experiences validated. The Career Guidance Centres are therefore a supplement to the assessment centres for validation of prior learning in upper secondary education, set up by the county administrations.

An evaluation of these partnerships pinpoint some overlaps or grey zones between career guidance services and services for validation of prior learning (Nyhus et al. 2011). The evaluators underline, however, that the career centres allow employees from educational services with knowledge in validation procedures and – on the other hand - staff from employment offices to deliver integrated services to learners wishing to attend vocational or general education at upper secondary level.
As to the second aspect of the question about a one-off national validation system formulated as a headline of this subchapter, it is relatively clear that the sectorial approach to validation has not put Norway at the top of comparisons of countries with integrated validated procedures penetrating all sectors. Hence, the 2010 edition the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, states that: "At the moment, there is no national framework for quality assurance and its application varies across the different counties, which presents a challenge at national level to ensure that an overall standard of quality is maintained."

The sectorial approach to validation has evolved during decades of procedures for assessing prior learning experiences. Given the differences of validation procedures between educational levels and across societal sectors of validation (read: labour market, the civil society and the education/training system); the European debate on quality assurance of validation procedures has not found very audible echo in Norway. Although the reason for this has not been investigated, there seems to be a tendency to trust the quality systems already established in each sector. This means that the so far non-formulated response to setting up specific quality assurance for validation appears to be mainstreaming of quality considerations as part of the general quality assurance in sectors of education and societal sectors.

The relevance for other countries from these observations might boil down to the following: More than harvesting from specific Norwegian experiences in striking a balance between calls for a one-off, systemic approach to validation vs. learner-centred validation practices reflecting local contexts, - the interest lies in investigating how these questions come to the surface in different educational sectors and societal sectors of validation.

7 Case studies: Practical consequences of the core elements

KIRA

Kira (30) has two children (14 and 9 years old) and possesses a school leaving certificate from lower secondary school. She could not take further education or training because she was busy looking after her children. She has always done temporary work; as a temporary cleaner in different medical practices or as a care worker in a nursing home. She received workplace induction training for these jobs, but no form of recognized qualification.

Kira lives in a rural community in a district of Northern Norway. The nearest town (8,500 inhabitants) is approximately an hour away on public transport and there is a lack of nearby education opportunities. Kira would have liked to attend more training in the past. However, this was incompatible with childcare and difficult due to her long working hours and commuting time.

Legal basis

She learns that a nearby upper secondary school offers altogether five different educational programs in general and vocational education, in addition to adjusted part-time training and some compressed offers for adults with long working experiences. The school has also set up a separate (but integrated) resource centre that specializes in further and continuing education for adults within specific vocational fields. Kira is happy to learn that her compulsory school exam admits her to enrol in upper secondary education without passing more exams.

By mid-summer, Kira receives confirmation of admittance to the vocational program she applied for, which will lead to a trade certificate as health worker. Together with the application which she submitted by early spring, she enclosed documentation of her compulsory education as well as justification of her work experiences.

The fourth year of this trajectory will contain in-service training at an establishment from which Kira asks to be exempted for a two-month introductory period and she submitted documentation for this. The reason was that she considers her work experience and workplace induction training before joining her present employer, equivalent with what she expects to learn during the vocational program for Healthcare, Childhood and Youth Development.

Process

In order to assess her demand for exemption, Kira is convened to an interview followed by a vocational test. Instead of writing an explanation about her prior learning experiences, she is grateful that she can go through portfolio assessment allowing her to enclose pictures of some work operations at her neighbouring nursing home.

There are no rules for where the interview and the test are to take place. Whereas Kira asks for exemption of a rather short period, the county school authorities proposed that the venue of the assessment interview is the resource centre close to her home. Arriving at this centre, Kira is presented to three interviewers of which one is employed by the county school administration, while the two others are permanent members of the examination board for the trade she is going to exercise.

Financing

Kira makes use of her statutory right to complete education at upper secondary level. This right allows her to go through assessment of prior learning without paying any costs. For this reason, neither the vocational test nor the portfolio assessment related to her application engender any costs for her.

Support

In the mid-summer letter, which confirmed Kira admittance to the training introducing her to the health and care trade, the school administration informed that she could attend an introductory course for improving her basic skills, if so needed. Although Kira is slightly dyslectic, she did not need to follow such a course; and thought that her problem could be sufficiently circumvented by means of the portfolio method for assessing her prior learning.

She later learns that one of her fellow students accepted to follow a preparatory course called “reading and writing workshop”. This provision was strongly supported by the shop steward of the enterprise where this student is working, and the trade union he is representing receives a State subsidy for experimentation with having workers’ representatives as learning facilitators.

BASTIAN

Bastian lives in a small town in the southern part of Norway. He was trained for general subjects at an upper secondary school and obtained a school leaving certificate; before starting training to be a nurse, but dropped out after one year. After ceasing his professional training, Bastian managed to break into IT as a ‘lateral recruit’. He has gained four years’ professional experience in a large industry company where he was responsible for network management and coordination of IT services. Following job cuts and outsourcing of IT services, Bastian initially worked under an external service provider with a 12-month fixed-term employment contract. After this contract expired, he received no further offer of employment and has now been unemployed for the past five months. Bastian has acquired expertise and experience in managing a small team and in network management, thanks to working in this field for nearly 5 years. However, he has no formal proof of these skills apart from his employer’s references.

Legal basis

His school leaving certificate from upper secondary education allows Bastian to be exempted from two years of school education at the start of the vocational program “Electricity and Electronics”, in which he wants to be enrolled. His work experience allows him to be exempted from parts of the subsequent two years of workplace training as apprentice. Instead of following a validation procedure recognizing his formal and informal learning, he decides to apply for an “experience-based trade certification” for exercising the recognized trade of computer electronics. Albeit not meeting the rule of possessing at least five years of relevant work experiences, Bastian is so close to fulfilling this criterion that he is advised to apply for the experience-based examination at the end of the skills development program he is presently attending.

Process

Bastian takes part in a skills development program offered by the local employment office, which contributes to deepening his knowledge in fields of IT that he is not yet acquainted with. This course also prepares him for the five-hour written exam he has to pass in order to demonstrate that he has acquired competence aims equal to the curriculum for the vocational program “Electricity and Electronics”, leading to the trade of computer electronics. This trade even requires an additional exam before being admitted to a craft certificate examination. After having passed these two exams, Bastian is invited to the final examination during which he meets three interviewers; one of them is employed by the county school administration, while the two others are permanent members of the examination board for the trade of computer electronics.

Financing

His unemployed status grants him free access to the skills development program offered by the local employment office. His status as a jobseeker qualifies for free-of-charge assessment of his prior learning experiences. However, it is more relevant for Bastian to apply for “experience-based trade certification” because he can then obtain his trade certificate quite promptly. This application costs €100 and the two written exams that he is obliged to pass before the final trade examination, respectively cost €50 and €100. His unemployed status also implies that the local employment office could cover these costs, provided that he submits a special request for this.

Support

Bastian is lucky that his contact person in the local employment office recognized the potential in his professional career. He did not know himself that he would be able to sit the final exam for computer electronics without first going through a full apprenticeship training. During his time in industry, no one drew his attention to the fact that he could acquire such a formal qualification. Before finally deciding to take the exam in computer electronics, the adviser whom he met in the local employment office set up a meeting with a nearby career guidance centre, which assisted Bastian in clarifying his job prospects.

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