

Guidelines for the Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning

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Basic information on *formal*, *non-formal* and *informal* learning can be found in the *EEAA Manual* (Fourth Edition, 2006, 3.3.3.)

These guidelines provide additional information in order to help schools in the implementation of the *EEAA Manual*. They are informed by the common practice in vocational training in Europe as outlined in the European Guidelines for the Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning (Lisboa Conference 2007, updated document 7 November 2008).

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1 Introduction and Definitions

Learning takes place not only in formalized settings (schools, programmes, courses etc.) but in ever-day life. For an inclusive understanding of learning sometimes the terms *lifelong learning* and *life wide* are used. The European Guidelines for the Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning [2008 Guidelines] define these key terms as follows:

Lifelong learning

All learning activity undertaken throughout life, and which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.

Life wide learning

Learning, either formal, non-formal or informal, that takes place across the full range of life activities (personal, social or professional) and at any stage.

In order to distinguish the different types of learning it has become common practice to use the following definitions (*2008 Guidelines*):

Formal learning

Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.

Informal learning

Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective.

Non-formal learning

Learning which is embedded in planned activities not always explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.

Until recently, formal recognition of learning (evaluation, validation, certification) was concerned almost exclusively with formal learning. A growing appreciation of learning which takes place outside formal training normally conducted in the context of educational institutions, led to an increased effort to recognize, validate and certify the non-formal and informal aspects of learning.

2 Purpose and Relevance

There are basically two cases in which the validation of non-formal and informal learning become relevant:

- The validation of non-formal and informal learning **prior** to the time of formal training (prior to enrolment): here the concern is how such learning can be evaluated and how all the relevant learning experiences of a person can be taken into consideration.
- The validation of non-formal and informal learning **during** the time of formal training (after enrolment alongside the formal training): here the concern is how learning which takes place outside formal learning activities can be recognized, measured and evaluated as part of the training.

Examples:

- **Prior informal learning:** A person has lived in another cultural context for several years. This person has learned a lot in terms of cross-cultural understanding, communication and behaviour. The question is: how can such learning be recognized and validated in the context of later formal training?
- **Prior non-formal learning:** A person has been asked by his/her church to preach occasionally. In preparation for this ministry this person has read several books on homiletics. The question is: how can such learning be recognized and validated in the context of later formal training?
- **Informal learning during the time of formal training:** A person is living on campus and plays an important role in conflict resolution among students. He/she is clearly learning a lot about community and communication, about conflict mechanisms and conflict transformation. How can such learning be recognized and validated?
- **Non-formal learning during the time of formal training:** A person reads a lot in a special field of interest outside the formal assignments and acquires considerable competence in that field. How can such learning be recognized and validated?

The EEAA Manual provides initial information for the recognition of informal and non-formal learning (3.3.3). However, field experience in EEAA accreditation has shown that additional guidelines are needed for a serious evaluation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning.

3 General Rules for the Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning

For a first and quick assessment the following rules of thumb apply:

1. Not all of life, i.e. **not every experience**, can or should be measured, recognized and validated. Example: growing up in a family is not, as such, a learning experience for which formal credits can be given in later formal training. Normal attendance of Sunday worship services should not be credited.
2. Prior informal and non-formal learning experiences must be **considerable and significant (quantity, quality and relevance) in view of the intended learning outcomes of the formal training** for which they should count. Example: if a person has lived in Peru with her/his family when he/she was a child, it will be difficult to measure and validate this learning experience in connection with later formal education. However, if a person has spent one year working in a mission project in Peru shortly before starting Bible College, it is more appropriate to think about recognizing some formal and informal learning.

3. **Experience as such is not yet learning!** Experience leads to learning only if it is reflected in dialogue with relevant theory. Example: if a person has worked with children in a church for many years (Sunday school), this is not automatically a measurable learning experience. It can become one, if this person can demonstrate qualified reflection of these experiences which may include reading at the level expected in the training for which the prior learning shall count.
4. Informal and non-formal learning must be **demonstrably similar in terms of outcomes** to the learning outcomes of the programme for which it is going to count. Example: if a person attended a seminar "Introduction to the Bible" in connection with the denominational training of Youth Leaders, this "Introduction to the Bible" must be demonstrably similar in terms of outcomes (content, quantity and quality) in order to be recognizable.
5. Prior non-formal and informal learning must be **documented** in order to be assessed, and it must be **assessed according to predefined learning outcomes, methods, standards and procedures of assessment** at the level of the programme for which it will count. Institutions that want to acknowledge prior non-formal and informal learning need a policy statement for the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning.
6. The recognition of **non-formal and informal learning during the time of formal training** (after enrolment alongside the formal training) is critical and several issues need to be considered. Basically it is helpful to distinguish three types of learning activities in this case:

(a) **Formalization of activities which traditionally have not been part of the formal curriculum** but can, to a certain extent and under certain conditions, become part of the formal curriculum (such as chapel services, prayer meetings, small group meetings, mentoring, etc.). However, in order to this, such activities need to be pre-defined in a syllabus in terms of learning outcomes, learning methods, standards and procedures of assessment, and they must contribute toward the overall learning outcome of the programme. Through this process of formalization such activities become formal and are, in a strict sense, no longer called informal or non-formal learning. The way in which this kind of learning activities can become part of the curriculum will be spelled out later.

(b) **Non-formal learning during the time of formal studies** occurs when a student intentionally wants to work toward a specific learning outcome outside the structures formally provided by the institution. This should not be a normal way of gaining credits; it rather is an appropriate tool for special cases. Students should normally follow the prescribed path of formal learning. It may be more appropriate in distant learning and in non-residential programmes. Example: a student may do a self-directed, supervised study on a certain theme, if the curriculum foresees such studies as electives or if, in an individual arrangement, it counts as exemption for a course in the formal curriculum (e.g. a particular course is not offered at the time when the student has to take it; or the student documents that he/she has already covered the material in former training but the credits cannot be recognized).

(c) **Informal learning during the formal studies** refers, in a strict sense, to learning experiences which occur in every-day life and work. Such learning experiences can only be counted toward ECTS credits within very limited boundaries:

(i) Time for the activities of everyday-life should not counted for credit: Examples: living in community; preparing meals; practical work on campus; physical recreation; attending worship services etc.

(ii) For certain very specific learning experiences, credits can be awarded, if these learning activities are clearly defined, integrated into the curriculum and thus,

serve the learning outcomes of the programme. Example: certain specific functions and responsibilities, such as serving at the student council or leading the worship team for a certain period of time can be defined as learning activities in combination with reflection, possible as part of a syllabus in Practical Theology.

(iii) The recognition of non-formal and informal learning after the actual learning should be avoided. Example: a student is responsible for the organization of physical recreation for the students as a non-credited activity. After one year she/he asks for recognition of the informal-learning because she/he learned a lot in terms of leadership. Such non-formal learning should not be recognized, except in cases where an identifiable, unusual learning experience occurred which contributes in a significant way to the learning outcomes of the programme.

According to the *EEAA Manual (3.3.3)*, "a maximum of 25% of ECTS credits may be awarded" for all aforementioned forms of non-formal and informal learning within the boundaries of the outlined specifications.

In practice it will be helpful to distinguish (1) non-formal and informal learning in relation to the defined curriculum (formalization of non-formal and informal learning) and (2) non-formal and informal learning and outside the defined curriculum (prior learning as well as non-formal and informal learning alongside the formal training).

In the following two chapters more practical help is given for both cases:

4 Practice of Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning in Relation to the Defined Curriculum (formalization of non-formal and informal learning)

The following examples may help in specific situations:

1. ECTS credits can be awarded for **internship, work placement and supervised ministry**. The same applies to **personal mentoring and cultural exposure**. The regulations are defined in the *EEAA Manual 3.2.8*.
2. **Spiritual disciplines, such as worship, prayer or small group meetings**, may be counted if they are defined as part of a module like spiritual formation. In this case there must be some sort of formal theory-based reflection of the experience. The learning outcomes of the assignments must be spelled out in the syllabus and they ought to contribute to the module's learning outcomes. However it is questionable to formalize all spiritual activities because, as is fitting with the character of spiritual disciplines, they should not be under the scrutiny of constant intellectual reflection.
3. **Practical student work on campus**: Possible work of students (housekeeping, maintenance, catering, building projects, etc.) normally serves two purposes: (a) students participate in the housekeeping work of their premises (as they would, if they lived on their own), and (b) students earn money by working for the institution. In any case, this work as such is NOT part of the theological and ministerial training. The time spent for such practical work should not be counted. However, depending on the defined programme learning outcomes, some experience in connection with this practical work may well contribute to some learning outcomes (e.g. character formation, social competences). A school may want to include reflections upon such practical experiences into the assignments of particular courses or modules. Or, another example: if students exercise leadership roles in connection with practical work, this may be considered as part of a course in leadership.
4. **Social life and physical recreation**: These are not envisioned to count for credit. They are part of leisure time and should not be put under the pressure of structured course work and intellectual reflection. But again (as mentioned above), depending on the

defined programme learning outcomes, some experience in connection with social life and physical recreation contribute to some learning outcomes (e.g. character formation, social competences). A school may want to include reflections upon such experience into the assignments of particular courses or modules. And again: if students exercise leadership roles in connection with social life and physical recreation, this may be considered as part of a course in leadership.

5 Practice of Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outside the Defined Curriculum (prior learning as well as non-formal and informal learning alongside the formal training).

The basic principle is that all recognition of non-formal and informal learning is based on its equivalence with the defined learning outcomes of the formal educational programme for which it counts.

In practice this means that the following steps have to be implemented (detailed description of each stage in the *2008 Guidelines*, pp. 41-42; list of components of each stage in Annex 2 of the *2008 Guidelines*):

1. **Policy and orientation:** The student is informed about the standards and procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. For that purpose a policy must be in place in written form (a manual for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning). This manual is approved by the EEAA. It answers the following questions:
 - How are interested individuals informed and advised in the process of preparation for the recognition of their non-formal and informal learning (regulations, standards, tools, procedures)?
 - How are non-formal and informal learning assessed (expectations, standards, credit-counting, intended level of accreditation, assessment methods, procedures)?
 - How is the entire process documented, filed and made accessible to the EEAA accreditation (process documentation and files, form of presentation to the EEAA).
2. **Documentation:** The student documents his/her non-formal and informal learning according to the guidelines defined by the school's policy.

It is important to notice that it is not sufficient to list the learning activities (not even if time and intended learning is mentioned). Acceptable assessment can only be based on defined, documented and measurable learning outcomes.

Example: a student attends a workshop offered by a mission agency dealing with cross-cultural communication. The student wants to get credits for this "learning experience". It is not enough that he/she documents the time (number of sessions) and the topics covered by the workshop. The student needs to document measurable learning outcomes which are comparable with learning outcomes of relevant courses offered within the programme for which it shall count.

3. **Assessment and validation:** The school assesses the non-formal and informal learning of a student based on the documentation and other appropriate assessment tools.

The basic rule for the assessment of non-formal and informal learning is defined by the *2008 Guidelines* as follows:

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The methods used for validation of non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools that are used in the assessment of formal learning

When used for validation, tools have to be combined and applied in a way which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning,

Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose

A school making provision for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning must therefore establish a list of assessment methods which are appropriate and ensure a reliable validation of the learning outcomes.

The following inventory of methods is suggested in the *2008 Guidelines* (p 44):

Debate offers the candidate a purpose to demonstrate depth of knowledge as well as communicative skills.

Declarative methods: based on individuals' own identification and recording of their competences, normally signed by a third party, in order to verify the self-assessment.

Interviews can be used to clarify issues raised in documentary evidence presented and/or to review scope and depth of learning.

Observation: extracting evidence of competence from an individual while they are performing everyday tasks at work.

Portfolio method: using a mix of methods and instruments employed in consecutive stages to produce a coherent set of documents or work samples showing an individual's skills and competences in different ways.

It is now possible to extend the classification to encompass some assessment methods that are common but are not easy to classify on the five categories above.

Presentation can be formal or informal and can be used to check ability to present information in a way appropriate to subject and audience.

This is now a useful broad classification and whilst some categories overlap a little, others may be further distinguished. Some specific validation processes may make use of more than one of these approaches to achieve greater validity, reliability, fairness and fitness for purpose of results. Each of the categories is now expanded to show the range of assessment methods embedded in each of them. Following this issues of quality are discussed.

Simulation and evidences extracted from work: where an individual is placed in a situation that fulfils all the criteria of the real-life scenario in order to have their competencies assessed.

Tests and examinations: the identification and validation of informal and non-formal learning through or with the help of examinations in the formal system.

The *2008 Guidelines* provide a more detailed description, pp 44-46.

After the assessment the school validates the non-formal and informal learning, i.e. it values the quantity and the quality of the submitted learning in comparison with the standards of the formal programme (learning outcomes, credit counting, level of studies, etc.).

Normally the verdict can take three directions:

- The submitted non-formal or informal learning is in full compliance with the expectations and credits can be granted.
- The submitted non-formal or informal learning is in partial compliance with the expectations and credits can only be granted if additional work is submitted (often a theory-based reflection needs to be added).

- The submitted non-formal or informal learning is far from being in compliance with the expectations and credits cannot be granted at all.

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