Introduction

This paper presents a brief overview and analysis of Nordic policies on validation. It is the result of a Nordic study initiated by NVL (Nordic Network on Adult Learning). The main focus of the study is the validation policy in the Nordic countries, but the study also includes reports on initiatives in and experiences from practice. Thus policy is seen not only as what is officially presented and written, but also as something that is expressed through initiatives in practice. The overview covers three sectors: The educational sector (in terms of adult education and vocational training, mainly on upper secondary level), the labour market sector and the ‘third’ sector (liberal/popular adult education, non-governmental organisations etc.). It should be noted that higher education is not included here. The study is complementary to prior European comparisons including the Nordic countries (Bjørnåvold, 2000) and reports from the Nordic Council of Ministers (2001, 2003) on the Nordic development of validation.

An introductory general reflection is that there is convergence as well as divergence in the Nordic approaches to validation. The main convergence is that there is an interest in and valuing of informal and non-formal learning, something that was noted by Bjørnåvold (2000). However, to a large extent there is also divergence – the Nordic countries differs when it comes to foci, approaches in different sectors, terms used etc. – which will be shown here.
The study

The data in this study mainly consists of questionnaires and interviews. The informants are mainly the representatives from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden in the NVL network on validation. In addition to these data, the informants have provided written material, that has been used to some extent, as well as contacts with additional informants from some of the countries. In the analysis we have frequently used what is called ‘respondent validation’, that is the respondents or informants have commented upon our preliminary results for improvement of the quality of them. The preliminary results have also been commented upon by a reference group appointed by NVL.¹

‘Validation’

In this study the phenomenon and idea of recognising prior learning – ‘validation’ – is seen in a broad perspective. Different terms are used in different countries, but we mainly use the term validation to describe the idea of giving recognition to prior learning, independent of where, when and how it has occurred – through documentation, assessment etc. However, assessments made within/after a course etc., of what has been learnt in that very course, is not included in our definition of validation. Our focus is on how this idea of validation is expressed in policy and practice – not on what terms that are used.

However, there is a notable divergence in terms, and even if we will not go deeper into these differences later on in the paper, we want to present the main terms used in the Nordic countries. In Denmark, Norway and Iceland, the main term is real competence – in Danish ‘realkompetencer’, in Norwegian ‘realkompetanse’ and in Icelandic ‘raunfærni’. This clearly puts focus on the actual competence that is to be recognised. In Finland there is not a single word, but the expression ‘aiemmin opitun tunnistaminen ja tunnustaminen’ (‘valuing what has been learnt’, or ‘recognition and validation of prior learning’) implies a broader way of expressing the phenomenon, including the process as well as the object of recognition. In Sweden the term ‘validering’ (validation) puts focus on the process rather than the object.

Some theoretical concepts

A central aspect of validation is that an approach in some way and to some extent is a matter of assessment of knowledge and competence. Here we make a difference between convergent and divergent assessments. A convergent assessment has a focus on if you know certain things. It is a matter of controlling knowledge, often in relation to predefined criteria etc. A divergent assessment on the other hand has a focus on what you know. Thus it is a matter of exploring your knowledge, without predefined criteria. However, these two ‘ideal types’ should be seen as ends of a continuum, where all assessments to some extent are more or less convergent and divergent. A strictly convergent or divergent assessment is impossible, or at least difficult. Even if the assessor has criteria, things turn up that you had not thought of before – unless the assessment has the format of a multiple-choice test. And even if you want to make a divergent assessment, you normally have some pre-assumptions concerning what is possible to know. It should be noted that the more divergent the approach is, the more it should become a matter of description rather that assessment in a strict meaning.

¹ A more extensive report by Hult and Andersson will be published later this year.
Another pair of concepts is formative and summative. Here it is rather a matter of what functions an assessment – or a validation – has in a certain context. A formative assessment has the function to inform and change the continuing learning process, while the function of a summative assessment is to sum up what has been learnt.

A third group of concepts that are useful to understand the phenomenon of validation, and its context, is formal – non-formal – informal. Organised education is formal or non-formal. Formal education/training is situated in the formal national school system, with curricula, grades etc. Non-formal education/training is other organised educational activities, for example in liberal/popular adult education in the third sector, or in-service training in a company. Learning could also be seen as formal, non-formal or informal. Formal learning is the planned learning activities in formal education. Non-formal learning is the planned learning in non-formal education, but could also encompass planned learning activities that are not organised as education/training, for example job-rotation or other initiatives to promote learning in the workplace. Informal learning is all other learning that takes place outside the intention of a organised learning activity – no matter if the individual (or a group) has an intention to learn or not. Further, validation, in the broad sense we use the term here, could also be seen as formal, non-formal or informal. From our point of view, formal validation results in formally documented competence – grades, qualifications, certificates etc. – or formal decisions like an admission to a certain educational programme. A non-formal validation is organised or planned in a certain way, like non-formal education, and typically it results in some sort of documentation different from that in a formal validation – for example a CV or a portfolio of merits. An informal validation could take place in an everyday practice, like informal learning. For example, a teacher makes informal assessments – validations – of students’ prior learning as the basis for planning and adapting teaching to the students’ needs and level of knowledge.

Fourthly, we will use the concepts system and structure. A system could be defined as ‘a group of independent but interrelated elements comprising a unified whole’, and structure could be understood in terms of that ‘the structure of a thing is how the parts of it relate to each other, how it is “put together”’.  

The five countries

In Denmark, validation is typically related to the educational sector, and validations of vocational competence are made in relation to criteria from vocational training. An important step in the development was the adult education reform in 2001. In addition to the focus on the educational sector, there are national documentation tools not only for this sector but also for the labour market and the third sector.

Finland has a national competence based qualifications system, mainly for the assessment and validation of vocational competence, which was introduced in 1994. This is a system that covers both the educational and the labour market sector, and to some extent the third sector. In 2007, a system for individualisation and modularisation of adult education is introduced, which means new possibilities for validation also of more limited competence modules.

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2 http://en.wikipedia.org
In Iceland, there has been a number of pilot projects this far, and development has been in progress since 2004. A national strategy and structure for validation are in the pipeline. What has been done up to now is based mainly on the educational sector and its criteria, but there has also been separate initiatives in the labour market. The main target group is employees with low formal competence.

In Norway, there was a project on real competence running in the years 1999–2002. The aim of this extensive project was the establishment of a national system for documentation of real competence. Today, there is a national structure with documentation tools for all three sectors covered here. However, the educational sector is in focus also in Norway.

In Sweden the term ‘validering’ was introduced in 1996 within the Adult Education Initiative. There have been pilot projects, and official reports have been presented. A national commission on validation is working during the period 2004–2007. As a result of this, a national strategy will be presented by the end of this year. The policy presented by the commission is promoting a divergent and explorative starting point for validation, but it seems like the actual initiatives often are more convergent in practice.

What seems to be true for all Nordic countries is that validation, or recognition of prior learning, mainly is situated in the educational sector, and that least is done in the third sector. Further, the social partners have been involved in developing models, and validation is constantly under development. None of the countries has a system for all three sectors.

A comparison of the five countries shows that Finland has an elaborated system, which covers the educational sector and the labour market sector, but where the third sector is included only to a limited extent. Norway and Denmark have developed what could be called structures for all three sectors, while Sweden and Iceland are still developing models.

**The educational sector**

A general analysis of the educational sector shows that a number of advantages with validation are promoted in Nordic policies. Validation is presented as providing individuals with self-knowledge, self-confidence and motivation to study. There is also the idea that education will be shorter and cheaper with validation, to the benefit of the individual as well as the educational system.

However, there are also some problems that are discussed in our data. A main problem is that the possibilities of validation are not very well known among the target groups. Another problem is that the individualisation that is the result of a formative validation is challenging the educational system when it comes to economy, organisation and attitudes. That is, individualised teaching and learning programmes are not necessarily cheaper than group-based teaching; individualisation means a demand on new ways of organising adult education; and attitudes among teachers who are used to teach students new things, rather than giving recognition to what they already know from informal learning, are challenged.
More or less, there is a legal right to validation in the educational sector in four of the countries, even if this right is not always claimed in terms of ‘validation’ and not for everyone. The exception is Iceland, that still – as mentioned – is on the developmental stage.

The educational sector is also signified by convergent approaches, where the educational system and its grades are the measure of knowledge/competence. The exception here is Sweden, where the national commission promotes a divergent policy. In Sweden, the course and grading system is seen as too narrow as the starting point for validation. Other methods for making visible and documenting knowledge are developed. But, in practice the approaches are (still) often convergent.

There are both formative and summative approaches in the educational sector, but often validation has a formative function in relation to supplementary education/training. A question that is asked is if validation in practice might be ‘more formative than necessary’. Is prior knowledge fully valued, or is additional education seen as necessary ‘more than necessary’? Here, the system for financing validation might cause problems – there are typically no clear policies concerning how education providers are paid for making validations, and it could be the case that they are paid more for supplementary education. Therefore, it seems to happen that the result of a validation is that it takes the formative function of stating that (a lot of) additional education is necessary, and the provider is paid both for validation and for education.

**The labour market sector**

Firstly it should be mentioned that validation (in a broad sense) in the labour market exists in different ways in the private sector. However, the extent of this is not known, and it is not related to national policies. Secondly, there are national methods and/or national documentation tools for validation in the labour market sector in most of the Nordic countries. In Finland, there is a convergent national method and a national documentation tool – the competence based qualifications system mentioned above, that is common for both the educational and the labour market sector. In Sweden, a divergent national method is developed, covering broad occupational sectors, but also more convergent methods for specific vocations. In Denmark and Norway, the main effort has been to develop national documentation tools. In Iceland, there has been developmental work and projects this far, but still no national methods or tools.

The aims of developing validation in the labour market sector are differing. One aim is to bring unemployed into the labour market, to the benefit of the unemployed as well as the employers in demand of manpower. A second aim is to strengthen the position of employees, through the visualisation and formalisation of their competence. Thirdly validation can be a tool for the employer to promote organisational development and in-service training.

**The third sector**

In the third sector, there is an obvious interest in making learning from the sector visible and valuable. However, there is also a scepticism vis-à-vis assessment and documentation of knowledge and competence. The scepticism is related to the freedom of the sector – there is reluctance to be put in a system of measurement and qualifications. An important question put, in relation to the scepticism, is also how central aspects of what is said to signify the sector – like personal development, social competence, ‘Bildung’ etc. – could be assessed and documented.
There are different aims of validation formulated in (relation to) the third sector. Primarily validation should be to the benefit of the individual. It could give a formal merit, but also self-confidence and motivation. Credit for non-formal learning/education could be valuable, for example in formal education. Further, employers might be interested in competencies from the third sector. In addition to this, there is also an interest in making (learning in) the third sector visible, which could be to the benefit of the sector itself.

In, or in relation to, this sector, different competencies are valued and validated. There are initiatives to validate ‘specific third sector competencies’, like the ones mentioned above, but also to validate ‘subject knowledge’ (e.g. language) developed in or outside the sector. There is also a variation concerning who is making the validation. It could be authorities outside the sector – e.g. from the educational system or the labour market – that assess learning from the third sector. It could also be actors within the sector that organise activities to value and validate non-formal competence (from the sector) and/or informal competence (from daily life, work life etc.).

One difference that could be seen between the countries is that two of them – Denmark and Norway – are developed national documentation tools for the third sector.

To sum up, validation is a matter of ‘transformation’ of knowledge or competence, which becomes particularly evident in relation to the third sector. Through different validation processes, informal knowledge is transformed to non-formal and/or formal knowledge; and non-formal knowledge (e.g. from the third sector) is transformed to formal knowledge.

The typical case
When it comes to practice, we can not give a full picture of validation in the Nordic countries. However, we can say something in general about what seems to be the ‘typical case’ of Nordic validation. This typical case is a matter of validating informal competence among employees (particularly employees in the health-care sector, with no or low formal qualifications). The validation is providing formal competence to this group. It is a matter of convergent assessments, based on a system of criteria and grading from school or vocational training. The choice of this approach is based in the need for legitimacy and trust, something that the established assessment system provides.

Convergent/divergent approaches
When it comes to the aspect of convergent and divergent approaches to validation, we will try to give an overview of the main pattern in Nordic policies. The general pattern (see table 1) is that the approaches are mostly convergent in the educational sector, and mostly divergent in the third sector. It should also be noted that this is a policy pattern – when it comes to Sweden the divergent starting point is the policy presented by the national commission, which is not necessarily reflected in practice.
Table 1. The general pattern in Nordic validation policies concerning convergent and divergent approaches.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Labour market</th>
<th>Third sector</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Convergent</td>
<td>Divergent</td>
<td>Divergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Convergent</td>
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<td>Divergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>Convergent</td>
<td>Convergent</td>
<td>Divergent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td></td>
<td>Divergent</td>
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*) The Finnish convergent system of competence based qualifications is common for the educational and the labour market sector, and is partly used also in relation to the third sector.

Formative and summative functions

The formative and summative functions of validation are difficult to separate in present approaches. The approaches are varying, and one and the same approach could have double functions. For example, competence could be assessed and documented in a summative way in relation to a certain module or course, but at the same time this assessment could act in a formative way vis-à-vis the study of supplementary courses that are to follow. However, we will give some more examples of what these different functions could mean in different sectors (see table 2).

Table 2. Examples of formative and summative functions of validation.

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<th></th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Labour market</th>
<th>Third sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formative</td>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
<td>Mapping</td>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summative</td>
<td>Examination, documentation</td>
<td>Certification, documentation</td>
<td>Documentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In education formative diagnoses and summative examination and documentation are evident examples. In the labour market sector one approach to validation could be a formative mapping of competence, resulting in further in-service training, and a summative approach is the certification of competence. Diagnoses, probably rather informal, would be a natural part of non-formal education in the third sector, while a divergent documentation could have a summative function.
Is everyone ‘validatable’?

An interesting question concerns the target groups of validation. Is everyone seen as ‘validatable’? Of course everyone has knowledge and competence that is (still) not made visible or documented. But the question is to what extent this is of interest in relation to validation. We can discern a number of different ways of arguing in relation to what validation is provided and for whom.

The need of competence (particularly in the labour market) is an important argument for providing validation within a certain vocation. This is related to another important factor – economy. Validation is not for free, and the need of the labour market is influencing the financing from the state. When there is no regulatory national policy the decision could also be put on a school, where the choice whether to provide validation or not lies on the headmaster. Another argument for not providing validation is the lack of methods and criteria in certain vocations – if the area has (still) not been developed. There is also the (convergent) view that the individual has ‘too little’ competence. This is based on the pre-assumption that there are criteria to fulfil, and if this is not possible there is no use in making a validation. Such a convergent attitude has in some cases resulted in the development of other, less encompassing, methods, which are not named as ‘validation’ but still are a matter of validation in a broader (and more divergent) meaning.

Validation in relation to education/training and the labour market

Finally we will discuss the relation between formal education/training and the labour market in validation. It is evident that there is a more or less strong relation and overlap between these two sectors. For example, competence criteria in vocational training are based on the needs of the labour market, and are also used for validation of competence developed in the labour market rather than in formal training.

We can see a difference in focus when it comes to if formal qualifications are dominating, or if there also is an interest in other types of ‘useful documentation’. The crucial point seems to be the question of legitimacy and trust. The results of a validation process has to be accepted. Thus, an important factor is what the demands of the labour market are. Do the employers ask for formal competence, or for real (actual) competence? The consequence could be a varying interest in formal convergent assessments and/or methods for non-formal divergent documentation of competence. In Finland the formal qualifications are dominating. The Swedish policy is promoting a more divergent approach, which should result in a documentation that still should be useful and have a value in the labour market. Denmark, Norway and Iceland are positioned somewhere in between these two approaches. An important factor here could be if the existing formal system gives value to a broader spectrum of competencies than those focused upon in basic vocational training, or if a different system is needed to give value also to those types of experiences that employers ask for when they want to employ someone who have work-life experience.

A final reflection concerns validation in relation to apprenticeship systems. These systems are more or less developed and extensive in the Nordic countries. It might be so that the existence of a developed apprenticeship system reduces the need for one more system for assessment of vocational competence called ‘validation’. But, nevertheless there could be a need for a
complementary system for documentation of competence not covered in the apprentice’s examination.

References

