

Summary

Remit of the Delegation

The National Delegation for Validation 2015–2019 was appointed by the Government to follow-up, support and promote coordinated development work in the area of validation at national and regional level (ToR 2015:120). The remit included working to establish consensus on the significance and function of validation in the education system and working life. It also included identifying the need for development measures and submitting proposals to the Government that can strengthen validation work in education and working life.

In August 2018, the Delegation was also instructed to propose a comprehensive definition of validation, based on the Council of the European Union Recommendation on validation, and with analysing and considering how the Swedish Qualifications Framework (SeQF) can be used to strengthen the interplay between validation and education (ToR 2018:101).

In this final report, *Validation – for skills supply and lifelong learning* (SOU 2019:69), the Delegation submits its proposals for measures for a coherent, national and permanent system for validation, so that more people can have their knowledge and skills identified, assessed and recognised.

The work and starting point of the National Delegation for Validation

The overall objective of the Delegation's work was specified in its interim report, *A national strategy for validation* (SOU 2017:18). The report states that significantly more individuals should have their knowledge and skills validated and that validation should be available

throughout the country, at all levels of the education system and for a broader range of qualifications in working life. Validation, as a pathway to a qualification, should have the same high level of legitimacy as formal education.

The Delegation's work to develop proposals to achieve this was conducted in broad cooperation with relevant stakeholders at national and regional level. Representatives of national authorities, regions, industries, the social partners, education sector actors and others have participated in this work.

Validation is important

Validation involves assessing and giving visibility, recognition and value to knowledge and skills that people have acquired in contexts outside of formal education. Validation adds value and benefit for individuals, employers, education providers and society as a whole.

People need to be able to build on and reshape their skills throughout their entire working life. A flexible and accessible range of relevant education and training programmes is therefore necessary. But people also need access to validation so that these education and training measures can build on the knowledge and skills they have already acquired. For adults, financial considerations play an important role when it comes to opportunities for further education. The possibility to have existing skills and competences assessed and recognised, and education programmes shortened, is therefore important to encourage an individual's lifelong learning.

Validation is also of major importance to skills supply in the labour market. A labour force with the right skills is crucial to innovation, growth and employment. In an increasingly changing labour market, validation is a key to a smooth transition and skills development for people in the workforce, and a tool to make it easier for jobseekers to enhance the visibility of their skills and find work faster.

By validating an individual's knowledge and skills, subsequent education and training can focus on filling any gaps to meet the requirements for the relevant qualification. Validation is thus also important for the efficient use of resources in the education sector.

A coherent and national system for validation

Sweden supports the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Recommendation states that Member States should have validation arrangements in place no later than 2018.

The Government's goal for the development in recent years of structures for validation in education and working life is for a coherent, national and permanent validation system to be introduced. Adequate regulations, organisation and funding are important institutional conditions to make such a system possible. Furthermore, developing knowledge about validation is of major importance to ensure the quality of validation carried out and that the benefit of validation is clear.

These institutional conditions are also fundamental so that more people will have access to validation. The scope of validation has increased – from a low level – in recent years. In this final report, the Delegation presents proposals and assessments to improve the overall conditions, and proposals to help increase validation of working life qualifications and within municipal adult education. In its earlier interim report, *Validation in higher education – for credit award and lifelong learning* (SOU 2018:29) the Delegation presented proposals for more individuals to be able to have their prior learning assessed and recognised for being awarded credits in higher education.

Proposals and assessments of the National Delegation for Validation

General regulation of validation

Validation is carried out by numerous different providers in both education and working life. At present, there is no coherent regulation on validation. The term 'validation' is also defined differently in different areas. There are thus different views of what the aim of validation is and what phases it should include. This creates uncertainty about the value of validation, and there is a risk that this uncertainty will lead to validation not being carried out to an extent that is sufficient and desirable.

A new common definition of validation

A common, comprehensive definition of the term ‘validation’ is an important condition for establishing a coherent validation system. A common definition will help create consensus and greater understanding of what validation is. This in turn will increase the value and benefit of validation for individuals and employers.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes that the definition of validation in the Education Act be changed. Validation should be defined as a structured process for in-depth identification, assessment and recognition of knowledge and skills that a person has, regardless of how they were acquired. The proposal is based on the description of the validation processes in the Council Recommendation but has been adapted to language that is more common in a Swedish context.

New ordinance with general provisions on validation

The Education Act will continue to have a definition of validation. The Education Act also contains other provisions that, together, provide a structure for how validation in municipal adult education is to be carried out. There is, however, a need to define the term ‘validation’ also with regard to validation carried out beyond the scope of municipal adult education. The definition must also be followed by a common conceptual structure that, at an overarching level, clarifies what validation entails.

The Delegation therefore proposes that an ordinance with general provisions on validation be introduced. The ordinance is to contain the Education Act’s definition of the term ‘validation’ as well as additional provisions that describe how validation is to be carried out. The new ordinance is to apply to validation processes in all forms of education, in working life and in other activities covered by the SeQF unless otherwise provided for in other statutes.

A basic requirement for achieving equivalence in validation, regardless of where in the country it is carried out, is a nationally-established competence standard against which validation is conducted. The body that carries out validation must also have a clear mandate from the relevant responsible authority in the education sector or from industry representatives in order for the results of

validation to have legitimacy. The validation ordinance should therefore also state that validation should enable a competent body to confirm that the person has acquired knowledge and skills that correspond to an established and relevant standard.

Increased clarity about validation in higher education and higher vocational education

To increase clarity in higher education and higher vocational education as to what validation covers and how it should be carried out, the Delegation proposes introducing a reference to the validation ordinance in provisions that concern validation of prior learning for admission requirements and awarding of credits in the Higher Education Ordinance and the Higher Vocational Education Ordinance.

Common guidelines or recommendations for validation in higher education are needed to give these education institutions support and the ability to carry out validation in an equivalent and quality-assured manner. The Delegation therefore proposes that the Swedish Higher Education Authority, in collaboration with the Swedish Council for Higher Education, be instructed to lead work on producing recommendations for validation in higher education institutions. This task should be carried out in close dialogue with the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions and other stakeholders.

Cross-sectoral national function and clear mandate for regions

A national strategy for skills supply and lifelong learning

The current changes in the labour market require strategic and coordinated measures for learning, transition and development. Technological developments give rise to changing skills needs and thus an increased need for lifelong learning. The national policy in the areas of education, labour market and industrial policy must be better coordinated to meet the needs in the area of skills supply.

The National Delegation for Validation considers that there is a great need for a coherent strategy for skills supply and lifelong learning in which validation constitutes an important component.

Work on the strategy should be conducted jointly by the relevant ministries and with broad participation from working life organisations, representatives of municipal adult education and regions, and other relevant actors. An overarching strategy will help put the issue of validation in its context. This will improve the possibilities to establish long-term, sustainable structures for validation.

A validation council led by the responsible minister

With the exception of higher education, there is currently a long-term and clear responsibility for validation in the formal education system and in working life (sectoral validation). The National Delegation for Validation considers that clear responsibility in each part of the system is a fundamental requirement. However, this must be supplemented by a cross-sectoral function at national level. The link between validation carried out in different areas remains weak, which on the whole results in a fragmented validation system. A national function will allow better use to be made of the synergies between developments implemented in the various parts of the system. Validation efforts will thus be more equivalent, regardless of where validation is carried out.

The National Delegation for Validation considers that the overall responsibility for coordinating and supporting the development of validation should lie with an agency or organisation with cross-sectoral responsibility to promote and coordinate initiatives for skills supply and lifelong learning. However, at present there is no such cross-sectoral responsibility.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes that the minister responsible should convene a council with overall responsibility for validation. A council, led by the responsible minister, will make the political engagement clearer. The Delegation considers that the Government should respond to the engagement for validation that exists in working life and in various parts of the education system. In the long term, the validation council should be part of the organisation proposed for implementation of the national strategy for skills supply and lifelong learning.

Skills supply a fundamental task for regions

The efficient supply of skills is key to sustainable regional growth in that employers in the private and public sectors gain access to the right skills. Validation can help create benefit from a regional skills supply and employment perspective by giving visibility to and confirming the skills available in the region.

Regions should promote, coordinate, support and increase knowledge of validation among regional actors. Regional collaboration on validation can contribute to equivalent access to validation between municipalities and to maintain consistency within the validation system.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes that skills supply should be a fundamental part of the responsibility for regional development and regulated in law, which would give regions a clear mandate to work with skills supply and validation. The Delegation also proposes that regions, individually or together with other regions, should be allowed to apply for funding from the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth to help develop and establish effective structures for validation at regional level.

Long-term funding increases the opportunities for validation

Long-term funding is one of the fundamental requirements to achieve validation and enable the development of validation structures. In Sweden, funding of validation is included in the ordinary reimbursement system for education. However, validation of prior learning requires considerable resources, particularly if the validation relates to awarding credits in formal education. The National Delegation for Validation previously made the assessment that a special reimbursement should be paid to higher education institutions for the award of credits (SOU 2018:29).

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education has drawn up a proposal, which the Delegation supports, for a specialised validation course in vocational higher education for the award of credits. In municipal adult education, it is possible to carry out validation in an orientation course, meaning that individuals may receive student aid and the municipality may receive state co-

financing through government grants for regional vocational adult education.

Funding to develop validation has occasionally been invested in both education and the labour market. However, more long-term access to development funding is available through the European Social Fund (ESF). In the view of the National Delegation for Validation, funding for skills supply and lifelong learning should be increased in the next programming period. For validation projects, co-financing should be managed using nationally allocated funds.

Knowledge of validation needs to be developed

Validation practitioners need the right skills to carry out high-quality validation. Skills development is therefore key to achieving quality validation work. The National Delegation for Validation proposes that funds be allocated to ensure continued funding of the academic courses for the competence development of validation practitioners, financed to date by the Swedish National Agency for Education.

Data on the scope of validation is lacking in certain areas. This needs to be improved to be able to monitor developments and carry out impact evaluations. The Delegation makes the assessment that research on validation must be expanded to provide new perspectives and better understanding so that validation activities can be developed.

Support for sector validation needs to be strengthened

Sectors own their validation models and are responsible for ensuring their development, quality assurance, financing and updating. However, central government has an interest in developing validation of working life qualifications to enable increased access to quality-assured and equitable validation. With regard to co-financing to develop sector models, central government's priority is primarily to support individuals and the possibility to have their knowledge and skills made visible and recognised in order to get a job or advance their education.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes establishing a government grant to develop validation of vocational skills. The

conditions for receiving this government grant should be regulated by an ordinance and formulated in accordance with EU regulations on state aid. According to the proposal, government grants will be awarded for initiatives aimed at developing models for validation of vocational skills. Government grants may also be awarded, following special notification, for adapting existing validation models for different target groups.

When allocating government grants, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education should particularly prioritise applications aimed at developing new and revising existing qualifications in professions that include a relatively large proportion of people employed in the labour market or in professions or skill areas in which there is a shortage of labour. Priority should also be given to qualifications expressed so that they can correspond to an SeQF level and designed so that validation can be carried out in accordance with the validation ordinance.

One condition for awarding government grants is that the sector's employer and employee associations support the application. Their ownership is crucial to ensure that the qualifications that are developed gain legitimacy in working life.

Increased access to validation in municipal adult education

Obligation to offer initial identification

Individuals need guidance as well as help in identifying their previous education and professional experience to be able to make informed choices. Each individual then also gains a better understanding of what validation could mean in their own situation. For some people, this initial identification may then lead to validation, which means that their studies can be shortened. An initial identification may also facilitate municipalities' organisation of educational programmes and examinations by avoiding erroneous choices and by students making a realistic study plan.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes incorporating into the Education Act an obligation for municipalities to offer an initial identification prior to studies or examinations in adult education. The Act currently states that both students and those intending to take up studies must have access to study guidance. The respon-

sible authority currently also needs to identify previous education and professional experience in order to determine whether an applicant is eligible for an education programme. The Delegation's proposal thus involves clarifying the obligation to meet students' and potential students' need for guidance prior to their studies.

Obligation to offer validation to students in municipal adult education

Adult education must be based on the needs and requirements of the individual. In the Delegation's view, this should mean that no student should need to complete the parts of an education in which they already possess the equivalent knowledge and skills. Students therefore need to be offered validation so that their studies can be designed in line with their own needs and goals for the studies.

However, current regulations in the Education Act state only that validation may be carried out. Although the data is insufficient, it indicates that few students are currently offered validation of their prior learning in municipal adult education. Our neighbouring Nordic countries have long had an individual right to validation. Validation is also much more common in these countries than in Sweden.

The National Delegation for Validation therefore proposes that municipalities – as the authorities responsible for adult education – have an obligation to offer students validation. This obligation concerns all courses included in the responsible authority's selection of courses.

The estimated impact of the proposal suggests an economic gain of more than SEK 3 billion per year resulting from reduced production loss. For the municipal sector, tax revenue is expected to increase by more than SEK 300 million per year due to faster throughput.

However, municipalities costs for education, including validation, are expected to increase somewhat, mainly due to added costs for developing more individualised and flexible study paths after validation. At the same time state expenditure for student grants is expected to be reduced by SEK 115 million per year due to faster throughput. The Delegation considers that corresponding funding should be transferred to the municipal sector.

Students will be entitled to a certificate following validation

The different types of documentation specified in current regulations contribute to a lack of clarity concerning the term ‘validation’ in adult education. The National Delegation for Validation therefore proposes that it should only be possible to issue certificates or grades after validation in adult education. This means that the documentation resulting from validation is given a formal status, which is expected to lead to greater legal certainty, equivalence and confidence in the documentation issued following a validation.

Students’ individual study plans are important. The courses and parts of courses that a student has had assessed and recognised, as well as the courses and parts of courses they need to complete after validation, should be documented in their study plan.

Principals should be able to issue the grade ‘E’ after validation, without an examination

The National Delegation for Validation proposes that a student who, during a validation process, is assessed to have sufficient knowledge in a course to attain at least the knowledge requirements for the grade ‘E’ should be able to obtain the grade ‘E’ by the principal without having to take an examination.

This proposal facilitates assessment in connection with validation. Rather than teachers having to consider all grading criteria and knowledge requirements when making an assessment, the knowledge requirements for the grade ‘E’ will be the competence standard against which validation is performed. It will also be clear that the validation process results in an equivalent documentation – a grade – as though the student had attended the course. A grade following validation also ensures the legitimacy of validation in relation to employers and education institutions, making it clear that the student’s knowledge in both cases has been assessed based on the same knowledge goals and knowledge requirements.

The same opportunity to obtain the grade ‘E’, without an examination, will also apply to students who have grades or certificates for studies at folk high schools or from abroad.