PRO✓E

Professionalization of Validation Experts

Results of the PROVE project:
rationale, impact and recommendations

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1.   Introduction

The validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) offers great potential for making competences visible. For example, the participation of disadvantaged persons in the labor market can be facilitated through validation and the acquisition of (partial) qualifications (Cedefop 2015, 19). Non-formally or informally acquired competences are also becoming increasingly important in the context of lifelong learning. Thus, the importance of validating informally and non-formally acquired learning outcomes is also growing in this area, which means that it is receiving increasing attention in theory and practice of adult education. Despite the growing relevance, the field of validation in Europe is characterized by a high heterogeneity in terms of validation systems and procedures. At the same time, a Cedefop study (2015, 32f.) shows that confidence in validation depends primarily on the validation personnel, and therefore on the work done by people directly involved in validation and accompanying candidates: "Trust in validation largely depends on the work carried out by 'front-line' practitioners and professionals directly involved with validation candidates at different stages of the process" (Cedefop 2015, 32f.). Nevertheless, there is no consensus within the European Union on basic competence standards or the professionalization of validation personnel. Rather, there are very different approaches and practices of recognition and validation of informally and non-formally acquired competences, as well as training and professionalization of validation personnel in the EU.

This is where the transnational project PROVE (Professionalization of Validation Experts) steps in. Its goal is to support the professionalization of validation experts and thus to strengthen European validation systems. With funding provided by the European Union's Erasmus+ program, ten project partner organizations from six European countries collaborated under this aim between 2019 and 2022. These were both research institutes and organizations specialized in validation practice, so the project was able to profit from scientific knowledge and a rich practical experience.

In the first phase of the partnership, a Competence Model was developed based on Eulers (2014)process model of Design-Based Research, which contains the central competences of validation personnel. In a next step, a Self-Evaluation Tool was designed, which validation professionals can use to reflect systematically their individual skills and find potential for development. Finally, within the PROVE project a Learning Tool Kit was developed as a set of learning resources. Using the resources from the Tool Kit, validation experts can improve their competences in the field of validation. All our products are designed to be adaptable to different practices and contexts. Therefore, they are provided with a CC license, so that changes can be made, and practitioners can work with the material, even in an adapted form, as long as the authors are cited. The PROVE products are presented in more detail below.[1]

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1   For further details, see PROVE Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership (2022)

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2. The PROVE Competence Model

In the first phase of the project, the PROVE Competence Model was designed to capture key competences of validation personnel. The aim in developing the Competence Model was to provide a contribution to the state-of-the-art of research related to the professionalization, description, and development of competences in the area of validation. It should also be usable in the field of validation and to offer guidance in formulating key learning objectives for validation professionals – both in diverse national settings. In some EU countries, validation is already quite established; in some, it is just getting started. Regarding the validation personnel, a distinction can be made between different roles. There is the validation assessor who provides an assessment of the prior learning experiences of the participant, using a number of relevant competence-based assessment tools. Furthermore, there is the validation trainer, who has the pedagogical, didactic and subject-specific expertise to train validation experts in fields like assessment, guidance and management. Also, there is the validation guide/tutor, who has expertise in validation-processes and assists learners in their personal validation-process and assists trainers, teachers, assessors and administrators in designing, implementing and evaluating validation processes for adult learners. Lastly, the validation manager has a systematic understanding of validation processes and manages these processes in a specific context with a team of validation experts. Taking into account these roles and the diverse stages of development of validation practices within the EU, we decided to design the PROVE Competence Model as a generic structural model. Thus, it can be adapted and concretized for different areas of validation and varying national settings in European countries, whereby the model is based on a heuristic understanding of competence (Weinert, 2001, p. 27).

Competences are understood as cognitive abilities that are available to an individual for problem-solving or can be learned, as well as the related skills and readiness in the motivational, social, and volitional sense to implement problem solutions in appropriate situations (Weinert 2001, p. 27). The core components of this concept were transferred by Baumert and Kunter (2006) into their model of teachers' professional knowledge,

which is linked to pedagogical and psychological theories. According to this model, professional competence consists of the combination of declarative and procedural knowledge; professional convictions, normative ideas and subjective theories; motivational orientations; and the skill of professional self-control (Baumert & Kunter 2006, p. 481). This model was also used as the basis for the GRETA competence model for teachers in adult education (Strauch, Bosche, Lencer 2021) and served as a basis for the development of the structure of the PROVE Competence Model for validation personnel. For the development process, which is explained in more detail in the PROVE article, the design-based research approach from Euler (2014) was used. To this end, an extensive research phase took place: In the first step, a desk research on the requirements, tasks, important competences and educational offers in the respective national validation practice was conducted by all partners. In the next step, a demand analysis was carried out, whereby the goals of the development process were once again defined in more detail. In the third step, the activities and tasks of validation practitioners were linked to the necessary steps in the validation process. In a table that sums up the activities of validation experts and the corresponding competences the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes were assigned to each of the competences. Then the results were deductively coded against a category system of relevant competences created against the background of the GRETA competence model. Using an inductive content analysis, additional important competences were identified. During the evaluation phase, a communicative validation of the model by the partners took place in several loops. In the last step, the competence model was designed, translated and an accompanying handout and manual were created.[2]

Thus, the PROVE Competence Model includes cognitive skills as well as motivational and social components, which result in four competence aspects: Validation- and Field-Specific Knowledge, Practical Skills and Knowledge, Professional Values and Attitudes, and Professional Self-Management (depicted in the outer ring of the diagram, figure 1). These four competence aspects are subdivided into eleven competence areas (shown in the inner ring of the diagram),

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2   Cf. Bader et al. (2022)

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and these are subdivided into 31 competence facets (shown in the middle ring of the diagram). The definitions of the competence aspects, areas and facets can be found in the PROVE manual and handout "PROVE Competence Model for Validation Experts - A brief Overview".
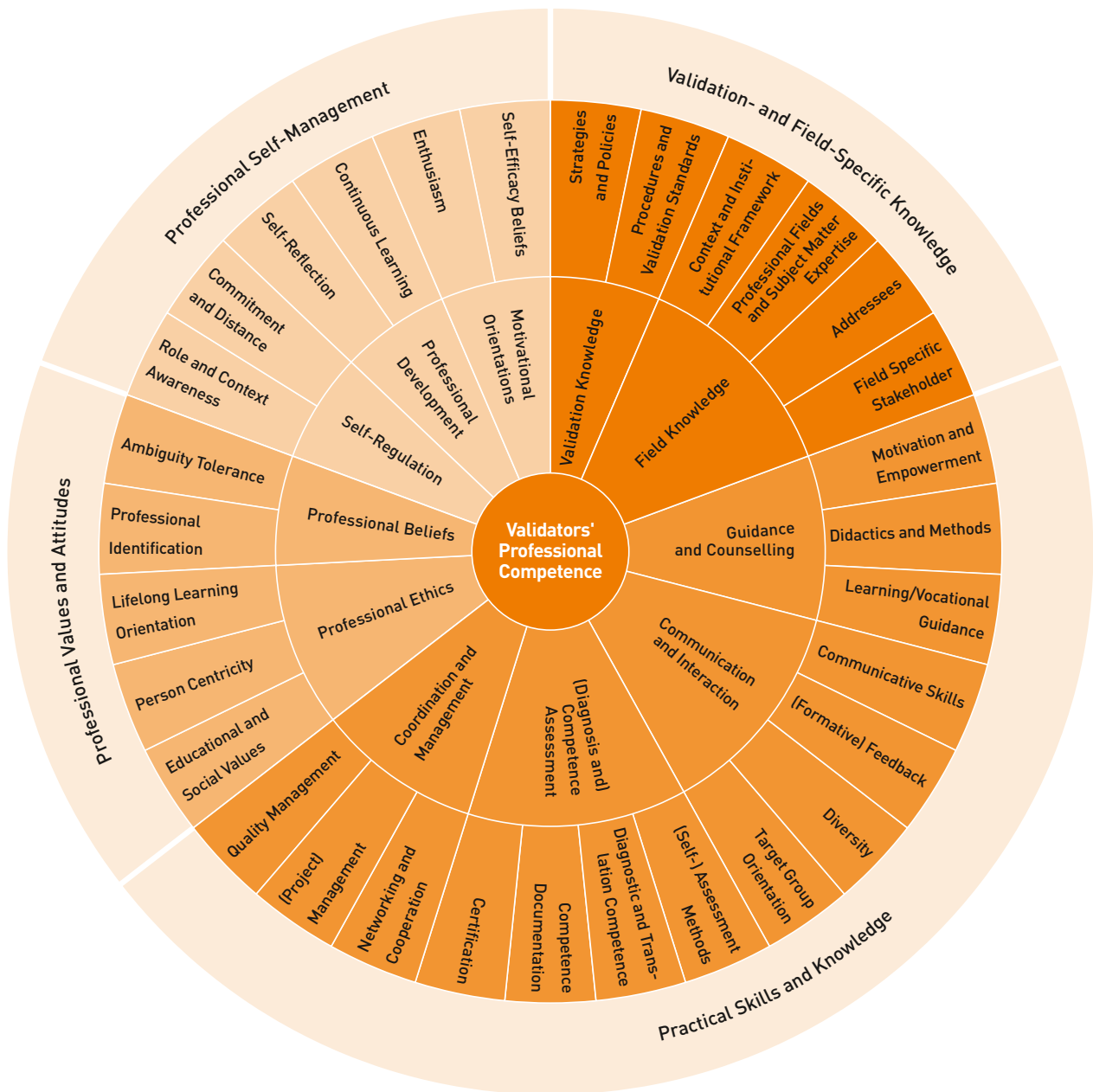

Figure 1: PROVE Competence Model for Validation Experts

2.1.   The four cometence aspects of the PROVE Competence Model

The competence aspect of **Validation and Field-Specific Knowledge** includes the two competence areas of Validation Knowledge and Field Knowledge. In order to successfully accompany a validation process, knowledge about existing framework conditions and specifics of validation is central. This knowledge thus refers to validation policies and strategies, systems, and approaches. Recent developments in these areas, both at supra-, inter-, and national level, also fall under this aspect. In addition, knowledge of the process of validation, related procedures, concepts, toolkits, as well as methodological approaches is important (Cedefop, 2015). Field Knowledge requires knowledge about different contexts of validation, including institutional

frameworks, different education systems, professional sectors, labor market conditions, and education policy aspects. Once again, current developments must be taken into account, and one must be able to apply knowledge according to the situation.[3]

The **competence aspect of Practical Skills and Knowledge** is divided into four areas: Guidance and Counseling, Communication and Interaction, (Diagnosis and)Competence Assessment, and Coordination and Management. In the validation process, candidates are often advised. Therefore, it is central to be able to design counseling in a way that enables empowerment and motivation, for which the selection or development of appropriate motivational techniques and methods and, according to Travers and Harris (2014, p. 236), the clarification of roles, responsibilities, tasks, and the flow of the validation process are also relevant. In order to establish a basis of trust for the validation process, activate the candidates and thus to fully use the potential of the candidates, adequate moderation and design of communication is central, which requires knowledge of communication techniques and methods and their appropriate application (Cedefop 2015). In addition, skills in the areas of diversity, orientation to the target group, and giving and receiving feedback are also relevant. For the diagnosis and assessment of skills, it must be possible to use methods and instruments for the identification, classification, evaluation, and documentation of competences appropriately (Strauch et al., 2009, p. 25). This also includes an appropriate conceptualization, application, and evaluation of the concepts, methods, and instruments used as well as the certification of validation results as (partial) qualifications or credits. The competence aspect ultimately also includes skills in coordination and management. On the one hand, this refers to networking with other actors and stakeholders to ensure an exchange of knowledge and experience and thus an effective use of resources. Furthermore, in addition to quality management, (project) management also plays a central role in this competence area; according to Argyris and Schön (1978), the latter refers to the performance and results achieved by organizations. For this purpose, knowledge about approaches and instruments of project management, controlling and development of projects, as well as quality criteria and their control in the validation process is important. In addition, develop-

ment potentials in strategic questions must be identified and management deployed in such a way that the validation activity is optimized and further developed.[4]

The **competence aspect Professional Values and Attitudes** includes the competence areas Professional Ethics and Professional Beliefs. This aspect is of great importance because subjective theories (Groeben et al., 1988) significantly influence the conduct of the validation process. Pajares (1992) defines beliefs as subjective explanatory contexts that contain attitudes and values (Pajares 1992). In the case of validation personnel, pedagogical attitudes towards validation, teaching-learning perceptions, the image of man, and their own understanding of their role are particularly influenced by subjective theories. Moral issues also play an important role in adult education (Erpenbeck 2010), as well as in the work of validation personnel due to the close contact with different people. Based on pedagogical norms and values, validation personnel are therefore committed to supporting individual participants.[5]

The **competence aspect of Professional Self-Management** comprises the three areas of Motivational Orientations, Professional Development, and Self-Regulation. According to Baumert and Kunter (2011), motivational aspects such as self-efficacy beliefs have a significant impact on the professionalism of actions (Baumert & Kunter 2011). These motivational factors of validation personnel manifest themselves in enthusiasm and commitment to the validation activity and, on the other hand, also in self-efficacy beliefs. However, since competences do not represent an unchangeable constant, continuous professional development is also central to professional validation activities. In the course of this, self-reflection (Pachner 2018) and self-regulation (Baumert & Kunter 2006; 2011) are of considerable importance.[6]

The model is available in English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Greek and German. Lastly, it is important that the PROVE Competence Model can be specified to different contexts. Therefore, it is possible to adapt the model for one's own validation practice and, for example, to change, delete, or add individual comp etency aspects, domains, and facets. Our products are CC licensed so that changes can be made if the authors are cited.

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3   For more details, see Bader et al. (2022)
4   For more details, see Bader et al. (2022)
5   For more details, see Bader et al. (2022)
6   For more details, see Bader et al. (2022)

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3. The PROVE Self-Evaluation Tool

Based on the PROVE Competence Model, the PROVE Self-Evaluation Tool was designed. This is a self-evaluation instrument for validation personnel with regard to their individual competences and level of knowledge in the field of validation. The goal is to offer an opportunity for systematically reflecting upon one's own competences and potential for development. The instrument consists of an evaluation sheet, which is arranged in accordance with the competence aspects, areas, and facets from the PROVE Competence Model and contains statements to which users can indicate their consent to different degrees. In this way, each competence facet is dealt with separately, so that a very detailed reflection on one's own competences is possible.

The PROVE Self-Evaluation Tool is processed by reading and assessing the statements in light of one's own skills and knowledge. Validation practitioners can select among 5 options to indicate the degree of their consent, which they fill in the fields provided. The number "four" indicates that the person is experienced in the aspect in question. The number "three" indicates that the user would like to develop their own competences

in this aspect. "Two" means that the validation professional wants to learn this aspect with a more basic character. The digit "one" implies that the person has no experience at all in the aspect surveyed. "Zero" is entered if the competence aspect has no significance for the person's activity or field of work, i.e., is irrelevant. This aspect is then removed from the evaluation.

The evaluation is performed automatically. The result can be easily accessed and interpreted by the validation expert via two graphs. In the graphics, it is possible to grasp quickly and intuitively how far-reaching key competences are already present or can still be (further) developed. Figure 2 and 3 show an exemplary result. The upper graph shows the results broken down by the competence aspects; the lower graph shows the results differentiated by the individual competence areas. Both graphs show the lowest value in the inner area and the highest value in the outer area. In this way, one can immediately see in which aspects or areas one's own competences are already strong and in which there is still room for development.
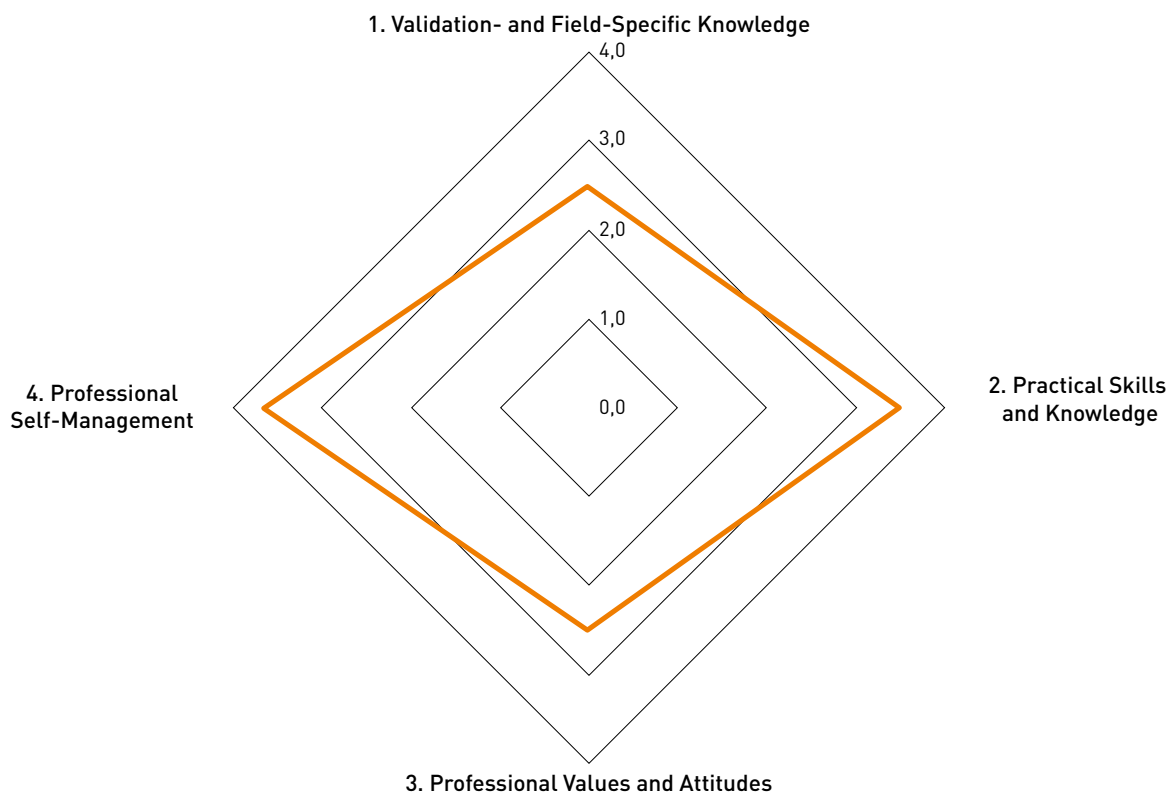

Figure 2: PROVE Self-Evaluation Tool, graphic on the competence aspects

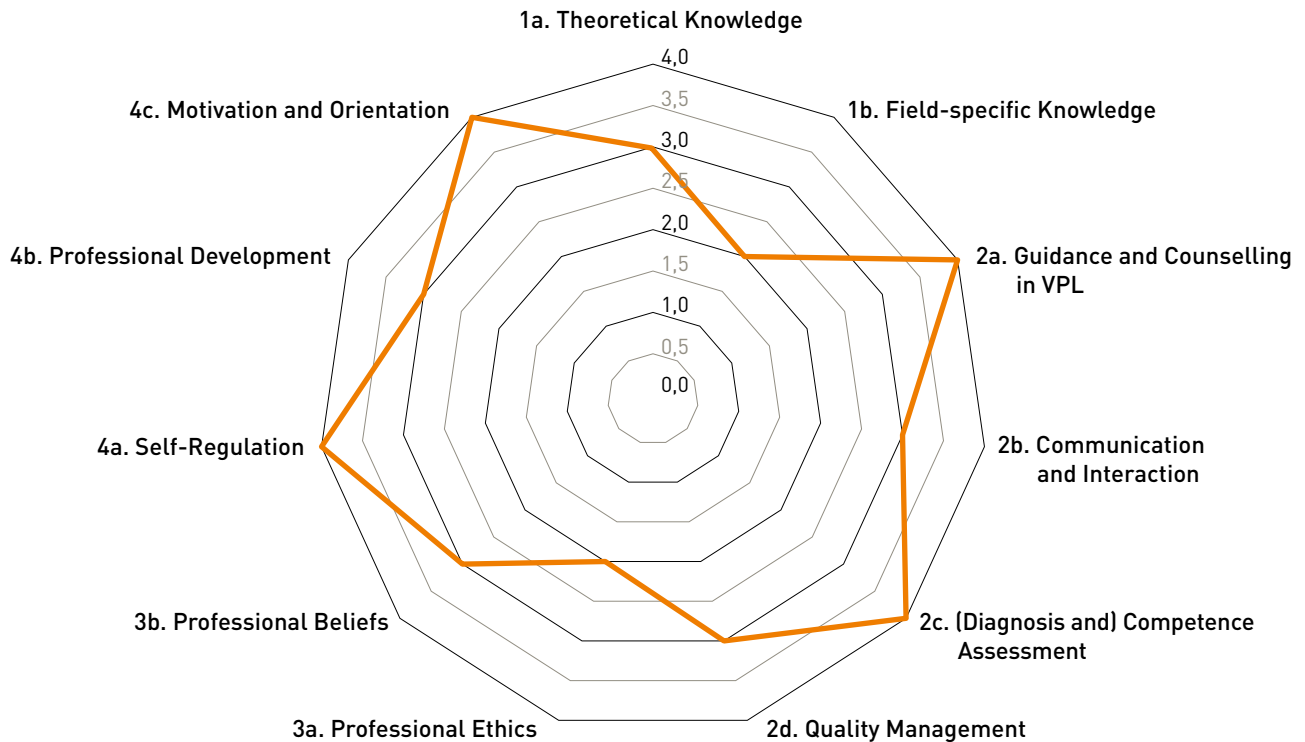PROVE | Professionalization of Validation Experts

Figure 3: PROVE Self-Evaluation Tool, graphic on the competence areas

Two different versions of the instrument were created for this purpose. There is a long version with detailed statements. This version offers a more in-depth look at one's skills and is appropriate for settings in which a very detailed analysis of the own competence profile is of interest. Additionally, a briefer version of the tool has been developed, which is less in-depth and gives a slightly rougher picture of one's capabilities and knowledge. This short version is particularly suitable for gaining a quick overview of one's own competence profile in the field of validation. The long version of the tool is available in English, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Greek and German. The additional, short version is available in English, French and Dutch.

The PROVE Self-Evaluation Tool should also be suitable to different contexts. Therefore, it can also be adapted to one's own validation practice and components can be changed, deleted, or added. For this purpose, it was provided with a CC license.

To ensure that the Self-Evaluation Tool is also easy to use and useful in practice, it was tested by 69 validation professionals from all countries involved in the project. Three quarters of the testers find the tool useful to assess or reflect on their own competences in the field of validation. 84% of the testers confirm that the tool captures all required competences of validation professionals. The feedback from the testers shows that the tool is good at distinguishing between strongly developed competence areas and areas with potential for development. Most testers recognize a personal benefit in using the Self-Evaluation Tool and see a gain in knowing the competences that are important in the field of validation in general, with the option to tailor them to specific contexts. 86% of the testers also perceive the Self-Evaluation Tool as a useful tool for identifying development potential for their own competences in the field of validation. In order to exploit this individual development potential, the PROVE Learning Tool Kit was developed as a third product, which is presented and explained in more detail below.

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4. The PROVE Learning Tool Kit

When skills in validation should be further enhanced, the PROVE Learning Tool Kit can be used. The Learning Tool Kit is a further education offer that contains a variety of high-quality learning materials in English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Greek and German. These can be used for independent further training. The Learning Tool Kit is available as a platform under this link: https://www.prove-ltk.eu/.

To find fitting learning resources, the structure of the Learning Tool Kit, like the Self-Evaluation Tool, follows the structure of the Competence Model. The search function was designed accordingly: First, the learning materials can be filtered by competence aspects, second, by competence areas, and third, by the language of the resources. All the resources for the chosen competence area and in the chosen language will then be shown, with a brief summary of the content and a link to the resource. Since its structure is based on the Competence Model, the use of the Learning Tool Kit can also be very well linked to the reflection results from the Self-Evaluation Tool. This ensures that targeted further training can be provided in precisely those competence areas for which development potential was identified in the Self-Evaluation Tool.

Parts of the materials are available as so-called Open Educational Resources (OER), which can be used without copyright concerns and adapted and distributed. Validation experts can also contribute to the PROVE Learning Tool Kit themselves by submitting proposals for additional learning resources. This can be done via the corresponding button on the Learning Tool Kit platform. Then, the PROVE consortium reviews the submitted resources and publishes them on the platform if there is a fit. In this way, the platform does not lose its topicality and relevance, remains in dialogue with the target group, and enables an exchange among validation personnel across Europe.

To test whether the PROVE Learning Tool Kit meets the expectations and requirements of the target group, 57 validation practitioners were recruited to test the product during the test phase. The feedback shows a high level of satisfaction among the target group: over 87% of the testers stated that they would recommend the Learning Tool Kit to others. Most testers find the Tool Kit useful for further developing their own competences in the field of validation. They also describe the design and use of the Tool Kit as user-friendly and the navigation as simple.

With its products, the PROVE project wants to contribute to the professionalization of validation experts and thus to the long-term strengthening of validation in Europe. On our homepage, all our products can be found: https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/174546.

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5.   Impact

The PROVE initiative has already had an immediate and positive impact on the ground. Through the use of a bottom-up approach, since we employed VNFIL practitioners experience and knowledge to develop the projects' deliverables, it was possible for a variety of stakeholders to apply practical tools to solve problems and enhance processes that arise in the professional context of validation. In this regard, the project's competence model (as well as supporting activities) and the qualification of appropriate specialists both contributed to the desired result. Most participants who were also VNFIL practitioners, according to responses from multiplier events that took place in the partner countries, found the PROVE competence model to be reliable and helpful in understanding the skills they need to have. This is because it directly relates to their existing line of work by making direct reference to specific competences that are analytically presented and related to specific tasks. One suggestion made by some practitioners who have applied the model to their own environments is that the model may contain more subject competencies (knowledge of the education system and labor market, industry basics, etc.). Therefore, each country can add concrete and country specific content regarding specific knowledge here. Furthermore, to describe the competenices with a stronger reference to their concrete practice, a manual has been written which describes the background and function of the model as well as the content of all competence facets in more detail and is available in English and German. Aside from concrete content-related methodological guidelines for the development of competence models, a transferrable learning environment, and a complete competence model system for validation experts, PROVE also delivered a system that can be easily used and adapted by relevant professionals in a variety of fields, such as adult education and vocational training.

The self-evaluation tool also added a sense of continuity to the process of assessing VNFIL practitioners' abilities, as it is based on the multiple sets of competencies defined in the model. The feedback received from the multiplier events also revealed that it is critical to find new learning domains and to point out some development opportunities that are geared toward educational and career assistance in order to maximize

impact. Apart from control, public relations, organization, and the like, the quality aspects for the specific implementation also include hands-on information for validation, which makes the self-evaluation tool particularly useful among VNFIL practitioners.

Similar to this, the learning toolkit should include formats that can be integrated into one's daily work (e.g., in the form of micro credentials) in addition to the limitations noted by many participants in terms of language access (since most available material is in English and less so in German or other European languages), as a significant number of VNFIL practitioners highlighted. Some practitioners stated that a connotation of the sources, as well as some recommendations for what each resource can be utilized primarily for, would be valuable in this context (e.g. training, direct application, reflection, etc.).

While the impact on the national level has been less noticeable, it is still evident, particularly in terms of recognizing and appreciating the significance of the competence model (and to a lesser extent, the self-evaluation tool and the learning tool-kit) as an agent of progress in the national VNFIL agenda. In light of this, several national authorities responsible for VNFIL must build structures for continued professional development (CPD), which should include validation instruments for VNFIL professionals who work in relevant organizations. As indicated in the preceding section, national authorities must develop a concrete VNFIL agenda, which must eventually be linked to up-to-date sustainable competence management systems capable of evaluating necessary personnel. According to some comments from representatives of national authorities, training course providers will greatly benefit from the PROVE Competence Model as well as the self-evaluation tool, because it creates a fully-fledged environment for competence identification.

In a similar vein, the project has a positive impact on the European VNFIL community because it aims to provide a transnationally developed competence model, tools and instruments that facilitate the exchange of know-how, and reliable products that reflect the work duties and tasks of VNFIL practitioners.

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At the collective level, existing VNFIL instruments such as manuals for learning outcome descriptions, collections of tools and good practice cases, as well as learning material, may be useful, but when it comes to hands-on practical issues, a more concrete approach is required, as is a policy that supports it. The usefulness and usability of the entire PROVE method are much enhanced as a result of the enhancement of operability, the coupling of validation and open learning tools, and the completion of a full qualification. Stakeholders in collaborating institutions and VNFIL providers can use the tools provided by PROVE to not only share units and learning outcomes or competence descriptions, but they can also work together to further improve them based on their individual requirements and resources. In this way, PROVE makes an important contribution to the advancement of the wheel and competency model systems for the benefit of validation experts who can readily access and

share the resources. The PROVE project has already brought together important stakeholders (for example, VNFIL providers, academic institutions, training providers and policy representatives) in order to propagate and valorize the methodology across the entire European Union.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the European VNFIL community is already expanding, with more stakeholders from the field actively integrating themselves into validation procedures. With the introduction and application of consistent assessment strategies, the availability of reliable open learning resources, and the presence of qualified staff, validation services can be made more widely available, and learners will discover new learning strategies and pathways for not only making their skills more visible, but also for increasing their mobility and mobility of their skills.

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6.   Reccomendations

The PROVE project looks forward to developing an updated and more concrete agenda for VNFIL in Europe, which includes the following points to be considered by policymakers:

- First and foremost, it is critical to connect the abilities developed by VNFIL experts to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The compliance with agreed-upon standards that are similar across the member states is required, but because VNFIL practitioners are not yet a universally recognized profession in all member states, an overarching system that describes the tasks, roles, and competencies of VNFIL practitioners and a reliable tool for evaluating are extremely beneficial. This has been accomplished through the development of a flexible framework that can be quickly adapted to the various demands that VNFIL practitioners confront in different EU member states.

- Secondly, the creation of learning outcomes must be aided by validating arrangements that ensure that there are synergies between validating arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, such as ECTS and ECVET. PROVE provides a prototype of a competence model for VNFIL practitioners in Europe that can also serve as a general guide in this direction, as it is built on a solid foundation of analysis of various competences that can be easily translated into learning outcomes at various levels of the EQF. As a result, it can be used to deliver consistent and high-quality training to VNFIL practitioners throughout Europe.

- The importance of quality assurance in validation cannot be overstated. Credit systems, which function in part as National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), will aid in the acceptance of validation as a legitimate method to acquiring qualifications and, as a result, the inclusion of mobility experiences in formal education. Both credit systems and national qualification frameworks (NQFs) contain quality assurance processes that are dependable and widely acknowledged (at least to some degree). Using existing quality assurance procedures to support validation practices will increase the likelihood of their being widely adopted. It is critical to explore how validation of non-formal and informal learning may differ from formal education in terms of the requirements for certification. For example, techniques for evaluating an individual's talents and knowledge must be responsive to the learner and not be dependent on the context in which the learning is taking place. These difficulties are addressed by PROVE, which establishes a common denominator between formal education standards and non-formal education or informal learning needs. That is a collection of criteria that can be used effectively in both formal and non-formal contexts to build competent professionals who have a long-term vision for offering VNFIL services that are equally recognized throughout the European Community.

- In addition, it is critical that Europass and any related papers are integrated and can be used in the validation process. It is possible to use Europass to provide documentation of the experiences obtained during a mobility period, but it is difficult to view them as evidence that will automatically award a formal certification in the future. Depending on the goal of the validation process, this documentation of learning outcomes may or may not be adequate evidence of achievement. It is possible that the PROVE self-evaluation tool will serve as a basic self-reporting record in a mobility program for staff training, and that it will be sufficient evidence to acquire what a VNFIL practitioner desires, such as an interview with an employer. When the goal is to incorporate the learning outcomes gained from mobility into a formal qualification, more reliable methods of evaluation that provide confirmation of the learning outcomes gained may be required for this documentation.

- Coordination among relevant stakeholders, as well as a certain degree of harmonization of the validation systems, are also required in order to develop a sustainable agenda that not only informs VNFIL practitioners' competences on a continuous basis, but also relevant material and examples for their training and development. PROVE emphasizes how critical it is for countries to continue to learn from one another and progress towards more integrated and coherent, trustworthy validation processes.

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Overall, the creation of a consistent profile framework for VNFIL professionals, which incorporates pertinent information about tasks and responsibilities, as well as the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes, is one of the most important aspects that immediately springs to mind after carefully analyzing and debating the scope, content, and underlying premise of the PROVE project. Experts and stakeholders are encouraged to participate in the development of this framework. For example, in contrast to the previous models, the PROVE competence model depicts the context within which VNFIL is provided, the framework that influences the precise shaping of the competences and weightings of VNFIL professionals, and the framework that essentially maps VNFIL as a non-static and dynamic field. Many dependent and independent variables, including the target groups (beneficiaries), the composition of the VNFIL team, the validation procedures carried out, the commitment to professional development among those involved, and the specific mission of the institute that provides VNFIL, all play an important role in this context. The PROVE project places particular emphasis on the following characteristics in each of the factors listed above:

1. Raising public knowledge of the vital skills and responsibilities performed by experts in this field.

2. The process of developing and using a variety of approaches to assess the learning outcomes of those who get assistance.

3. Critical problems include the administration, organization, and performance of major service providers in the employment and assistance of field people.

4. Employees who are involved in CPD are required to maintain knowledge and skills related to their professional lives while also learning new information, abilities, and attitudes that are required for successful practice.

Last but not least, working towards the professionalization and acknowledgment of the job of VNFIL workers in the EU is a work in progress that is currently being pursued. It is only through the establishment of applicable policies that the development of sustainable and dependable VNFIL practices can be ensured. VNFIL should not be regarded as a purely technical issue involving the accumulation of skills and the accreditation of previously unrecognized informal knowledge, but rather as an engagement with alternative communities of practice, diverse forms of cultural expression, environmental traditions, and workplace practices, among other things. It is necessary to define recognition as an integrated examination of the information, skills, and understandings that exist in both individuals and communities. A human urge to be seen and appreciated for what one already knows, to be provided with fresh learning chances, and to make a positive contribution to society through innovative and meaningful labor, is represented by VNFIL. It is therefore necessary for the personnel who work in VNFIL to properly acquire certain competences and skill-sets that are reflective of their daily practices in order for this to be accomplished. A vacuum does not exist for VNFIL professionals when they are working. They are dedicated, specialized employees who will only be able to progress further if they see themselves as part of a professional community in which they operate. In VNFIL, there is an urgent need for the professional development of community-based practitioners. This requirement, on the other hand, necessitates the unification of systemic and individual perspectives on VNFIL in order to pave the way for a more comprehensive and integrated approach. Individuals and groups' resources, capacities, and motivation must be taken into consideration while designing educational systems, rather than the reverse. It has emphasized the importance of global benchmarks, common concerns, and shared educational techniques, while also taking into consideration the wide range of settings found in different countries. This argument should be allowed to continue because it has the potential to have enormous consequences for achieving real equity gains for individuals and their opportunities, for countries and their societal issues, and for those who are engaged in improving equity in education around the world. The number of professionals working in learning and training systems is increasing, and they are increasingly taking on the role of lifelong learners. The ambassadors of an open and accessible learning system, which provides learning chances to all while allowing for learning for any purpose in any setting, will take on these new responsibilities.

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7. Conclusion

The term "Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning" (VNFIL) has evolved in the current EU policy environment from a broad term that encompasses a wide range of divergent events in the world's political and cultural debate to a more narrowly focused plan of action that is more focused on the concept of economic progress. According to current thinking, expanding opportunities for talent acquisition is an important step toward achieving a strategic condition centered on the likelihood of actively participating in economic and productive processes as a result of obtaining those skills. Certainly, there is a lack of clarity in the existing practice of VNFIL regarding essential terms and concepts, as well as the tasks that are required to be carried out. This specialized field of research, practice, and policy creation makes use of a plethora of terms, some of which are: recognition, justification, certification, and validation, to name a few examples. Researchers, practitioners, legislators, and even users have only recently realized the necessity for them to be defined, despite decades of debate. A further concern is that, in light of Europe's challenges such as increased global competition, high rates of youth unemployment, a high proportion of low-skilled workers, and an aging population, validation is not yet widely recognized as a critical instrument for aiding the transfer and acceptance of all learning outcomes across different settings and contexts (by individuals, stakeholders, and social partners). In modern Europe, the validation of individual learning outcomes, which may result in the awarding of a certificate or diploma, is the primary focus of validation. Real difficulty for everyone involved in the process stems from the manner in which the review will be conducted, who will be held accountable, and how it will be carried out in accordance with what standards.

As a first step in establishing basic norms for professional activity in the fragmented field of VNFIL action, it appears necessary to develop a competency model to serve as a foundation for professionalization. With the PROVE competence model, we set the ground for it. Following European policies, it is proposed that validation practitioners strengthen their professional capabilities in order to construct comprehensive,

highly specialized, and high-quality validation systems in each of the member countries of the European Union. Through the naming and description of skills, it is possible to make individual and collective professionalism readable, both internally for validation practitioners and externally for the general public. The term "professionalism," as previously stated, should not be taken to mean a single performance by a specialized worker who possesses knowledge, skills, and qualifications only. Professionalism rather, when taken in its broadest and most inclusive definition, considers the reality that professional action is intimately tied to a variety of social, institutional, and organizational issues. Using a multi-level approach, professionalization includes societal and institutional factors such as regulations and laws or employment structures, organizational factors that take into account the increasing importance of organizations in providing working contexts, as well as subjective factors relating to the professional personnel. In an otherwise chaotic domain of knowledge and practice, a required competence model for VNFIL specialists is intended to bring order to the situation. Changes in the workplace, the necessity for continual adaptation and lifelong learning, and the loss of what may be referred to as "conventional learning" approaches all play a role in this, to varying degrees. These are also difficulties that VNFIL will have to deal with as part of its operation. An individual's entire spectrum of knowledge and abilities, regardless of where or how they were acquired, is intended to be made visible and helpful through the VNFIL. When we apply the PROVE competence model, we can see that VNFIL is no longer considered a concept, but rather as a process. In other words, the model materializes the various processes, facets and tasks of those professionals who operate in the field. Bringing to light, making visible, and adding value to those competencies (mostly horizontal or transversal) gained through non-formal or informal learning paths requires the use of instruments, mechanisms, or techniques that not only provide reliability for practice but also monitor or control the process's final outcome; this is referred to as authorizing the learning process.

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Glossary terms

- **Accreditation** is a process by which an approved body, on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes and/or competences according to different purposes and methods, awards qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles), or grant equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issue documents such as portfolios of competences. In some cases, the term accreditation applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a program as a whole (UIL, 2012).

- **Assessment:** process of appraising knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria (learning expectations, measurement of learning outcomes). Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification (CEDEFOP, 2014).

- **Assessment of competences:** sum of methods and processes used to evaluate the attainments (knowledge, know-how and/or competences) of an individual, and typically leading to certification (CEDEFOP, 2002).

- **Assessment of learning outcomes:** process of appraising knowledge, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria, specifying learning methods and expectations. Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification (CEDEFOP, 2002)

- A **certificate** is an official document, issued by an awarding body, which records achievements of an individual following assessment against a predefined standard (CEDEFOP, 2014).

- **Certification:** process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title of learning outcomes formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard (CEDEFOP, 2014).

- **Certification of competences:** process of formally validating knowledge, know-how and/or competences acquired by an individual following a standardized assessment procedure. Certification results in the issuing of certificates or diplomas by an accredited awarding body (CEDEFOP, 2002).

- **Credentials:** Credentials (micro- or nano-credentials and others) are promoted as a complementary way of valuing learning, allowing individuals to collect and document personal learning experiences in a flexible way, at their own pace and throughout their life.

- **Competence** is the ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal or professional development), or the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development (CEDEFOP, 2014).

- **Employability:** the degree of adaptability an individual demonstrates to find a job, keep it, and update occupational competences (it does not depend only on the adequacy of knowledge and competences of individuals but also on the incentives and opportunities offered to individuals to seek employment) (CEDEFOP, 2002)

- **Empowerment** refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. Empowerment can also be described as 'putting the individual in her/his own power'. Empowerment is then the process by which people can get a better grip on events and situations that are important to them (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

- **Field-specific knowledge** in the PROVE project refers to knowledge about the context as well as institutional framework conditions of validation procedures. This also includes (vocational and further) education systems and policies, occupational sectors, and occupation-related legal bases.

- **Formal education** is a structured and stratified learning pathway. It consists of primary, secondary, and higher education. Those who cannot follow formal education or aim to be educated at an older age can opt for non-formal education (Kartini, 2016).

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- **Formal learning** takes place in education and training institutions, is recognized by relevant national authorities, and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications, and teaching learning requirements (UIL, 2012).

- **Informal education** isn't organized nor systematized education. It is mostly unintentional and offered through 'homeschooling,' an education activity in which parents teach their children at home (Kartini, 2016).

- **Informal learning** is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through interests and activities of individuals. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, competences gained in informal learning can be made visible, and can contribute to qualifications (UIL, 2012).

- **Knowledge** is the outcome of assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories, and practices related to a field of study or work (CEDEFOP, 2014).

- A **Learning society** is a society in which learning is considered important or valuable, where people are encouraged to continue to learn throughout their lives, and where the opportunity to participate in education and training is available to all (Faure et al., 1972).

- **Lifelong learning** embraces all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills/competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons (CEDEFOP, 2014).

- **Non-formal education** includes learning pathways outside formal education that can also be followed in a structured and stratified way, but then as courses or training programs (Kartini, 2016).

- **Non-formal learning** is structured according to educational and training arrangements, but more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organizations. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifi-

cations and other recognitions (UIL, 2012).

- **Portfolio:** this is the main tool and process suggested by the CEDEFOP for identifying and expressing a non-formal and informal learning. The portfolio process follows a three-step process. The first step identifies relevant experiences acquired. The second step proposes a detailed description of experience. A third step is dedicated to competences, which emerge from the description of the experience (Halba, 2014).

- **Professional values** are the core values and ethics someone adopts and demonstrates while working or acting.

- **Qualification:** Formal outcome (certificate, diploma, or title) of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards and/or possesses the necessary competences to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the labor market and in education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practice a trade (CEDEFOP, 2014).

- **Recognition** is a process of granting official status to learning outcomes and/or competences, which can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society (UIL, 2012).

- **Recognition of competences** - formal recognition by awarding certificates or by granting equivalence, credit units, validation of gained competences differs from social recognition defined by the acknowledgement of the value of competences by economic and social stakeholders (CEDEFOP, 2002).

- **Self-evaluation** serves to optimize self-reflection and professional pedagogical action. In contrast to the everyday exchange of experiences, self-evaluation takes place systematically and under the consideration of selected criteria.

- **Self-management** is the ability to manage one's behavior, thoughts, and emotions in a conscious and productive way.

- **Skill** is the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems (CEDEFOP, 2014).

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- **standard (or referential)** - expectation, obligation, requirement, or norm expected. It is possible to distinguish between (CEDEFOP, 2002):

  1. educational standard refers to the statements of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements as well as resources required to meet the learning objectives;

  2. occupational standard refers to the statements of the activities and tasks related to - or to the knowledge, skills and understanding needed for - a specific job;

  3. assessment standard refers to the statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed and the methodology used;

  4. validation standard refers to the statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed, the assessment methodology used, as well as the level of performance to be reached;

  5. certification standard refers to the statements of the rules applicable for obtaining a certificate or diploma as well as the rights conferred.

- **Validation** is the confirmation by an approved body that learning outcomes or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies (UIL, 2012).

- **Validation practitioners** are:

  → The **validation assessor** can adequately (1) provide an assessment of the prior learning experiences of the participant, using several relevant competence-based assessment tools, and (2) write a report focusing on the summative as well as the formative outcomes of the assessment.

  → The **validation guide/tutor** has expertise in validation-processes and can (individual level) assist learners in their personal validation-process and (organizational level) assist trainers, teachers, assessors and administrators in designing, implementing and evaluating validation processes for adult learners.

  → The **validation manager** is able to demonstrate systematic understanding of validation processes and managing these processes in a specific context with a team of validation experts.

  → **The validation** trainer has the pedagogical, didactic, and subject-specific expertise to train validation experts in fields like assessment, guidance, and management

- **Validation of Prior Learning** (VPL or Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning, VNFIL) is the process of recognizing and validating learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings (Duvekot et al., 2007).

- **Valuing learning** - the process of recognizing participation in and outcomes of (formal, non-formal, informal) learning, to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward learning (CEDEFOP, 2002).

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The EU-project PROVE "PRofessionalization Of Validation Experts" contributes to the professionalization of staff involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) by developing a generic competence model for validation professionals. The model is a starting point for further project materials (e.g. self-evaluation tool) and provides a structure for competence standards every country or organization can choose from or prioritize depending on their requirements and needs.

This report gives an insight into the project, its background, the key results and its impact on validation in Europe.

The project is being coordinated by the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen as the coordinating institution, in cooperation with partner organizations in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Portugal and The Netherlands. The project consortium represents a broad spectrum of validation providers, promoters of VPL and research institutes focusing on VPL, professionalization and competence development. The products developed as part of the project and further information are available for free on the PROVE home page: https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/174546

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