

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. Its remit includes identifying what development action and changes are justified and presenting proposals to the Government that can strengthen validation work in education and working life.

In this report the Delegation presents proposals to enable more people to have their prior learning assessed and recognised for credits in higher education.

Validation of skills and qualifications in higher education needs to increase

In its interim report *En nationell strategi för validering (A national strategy for validation)* (SOU 2017:18) the Delegation made the assessment that the development of validation in higher education is one of the areas that should be given priority. The development of structures for validation is weak. At the same time there are great needs among jobseekers, newly arrived immigrants and working people to have skills and competences developed in contexts other than Swedish higher education mapped, assessed and recognised.

This interim report *Validering i högskolan – för tillgodoräknande och livslångt lärande (Validation in higher education – for credit award and life-long learning)* (SOU 2018:29) is intended to improve the conditions for fair and flexible recognition of prior learning, irrespective of where, when and how the individual has developed their competences. Functioning validation for the award of credits is of central importance in realising the possibilities of life-long learning in higher

education and in promoting mobility and internationalisation. It is also of great importance for the skills provision in the labour market.

Validation and recognition of prior learning

An international commitment

The *Lisbon Recognition Convention* stresses the principle of fair and flexible recognition of programmes and periods of study from other countries. The focus of recognition processes in Europe has shifted from the content of a study programme and the forms for learning to what an individual is actually capable of after completing the programme. Recognition must be seen from a holistic perspective that focuses on what a programme is intended to lead to and should only be refused if it is possible to point to substantial differences from the learning outcomes of the programme to be credited. Sweden ratified the Convention in August 2001.

Since 2003 the Lisbon Convention has been an integral part of the *Bologna Process*, where the need to promote life-long learning and establish systems for validation and recognition of knowledge and skills developed in all forms of learning has been repeatedly highlighted. At the most recent ministerial conference in 2015 Ministers of Education in the European Higher Education Area agreed to work to remove barriers to access to higher education and to facilitate the issuing of qualifications based on prior learning.

Sweden also supports the *Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on validation*. It states that Member States should have in place, no later than 2018, arrangements which enable individuals to have knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated.

Development of validation in Swedish higher education

Development of validation in fits and starts

The question of validation was raised in the early 2000s in order to promote life-long learning and broader access to higher education. In the Government Bill *Den öppna högskolan (The Open University)* (Govt Bill 2001/02:15) the Government set out the direction for how

higher education institutions would assess the prior learning of applicants and students to a greater extent. The possibility of having prior learning validated for admission requirements or awards of credits is regulated in the Higher Education Ordinance. The assessment of prior learning is part of the mission of all universities and other higher education institutions.

However, the work of higher education institutions on validation that started in the early 2000s came to a halt a few years later. The exception is the area of teacher education, where validation has been an important part of the special initiatives in education that have been under way throughout the period. The Government's initiative in 2016–2018 for validation and the assessment of prior learning in higher education means that renewed development work has started on a broad front. Thirty higher education institutions are participating in this pilot scheme, which is being coordinated by the Swedish Council for Higher Education.

Need to put structures in place for the recognition of prior learning

The changes in the competences required in working life, partly as a result of digitisation, mean that the need for life-long learning is greater today than at the beginning of this century. Validation and the recognition of prior learning are a key component of action to enable life-long learning. It must be possible for competence developed through prior education or work experience or in some other way to be “cashed” and provide the possibility of a frictionless additional qualification that can lead on to a new job or occupational area.

To a great extent, the needs for continued professional development are at higher education level. The recognition of prior learning therefore needs to be a natural part of the activities of higher education institutions. Well-functioning processes for validation in higher education are also essential to enable people with qualifications from other countries to continue their studies at the right level or to have the opportunity to supplement their education with the knowledge needed to be able to work in their occupation in Sweden.

Low scale and lack of generosity and equivalence

Statistics about validation in higher education either do not exist or are impaired by major deficiencies. The Inquiry's presentation of credit awards based on other programmes or knowledge and skills developed in occupational activities shows an increase up until 2009. In that year there were records of activities other than prior higher education as a basis for credit awards granted to 1 300 students. In 2015 activities other than higher education were only given as the basis for credit awards for just over 100 students. This low scale is also confirmed by data from individual higher education institutions. However, the statistics do not contain any information on the basis for the credit awards for a large and growing number of students which probably means that there are unreported figures concerning the number of credit awards for prior learning.

Earlier monitoring of the application of credit award rules by higher education institutions has pointed to deficiencies both in the formal procedure and in the generosity of the assessments. The Inquiry's mapping of appeals concerning credit awards shows a strong increase in recent years. It also indicates that there is a risk of arbitrariness in the application by higher education institutions of the provisions on the assessment of knowledge and skills developed in occupational activities.

Action is needed at local level to make validation work better

Several challenges remain before the validation and recognition of prior learning becomes a natural part of the activities of higher education institutions. There is still a lack of *structures and methods* in work on validation. Dealing with this problem is a clear focus of the ongoing pilot for validation and assessment of prior learning.

The Delegation for Validation emphasises that higher education institutions need to cooperate to draft *common guidelines* in the form of recommendations for the work of higher education institutions on the recognition of prior learning. These guidelines should deal with questions concerning the recognitions of competences based on formal as well as informal and non-formal learning. Common guidelines in recommendations from the Association of Swedish Higher Education

Institutions can help to clear up the present uncertainty in higher education about the application of the provisions on credit awards.

The Delegation also recommends that each higher education institution sets up a *central entry point* for applications for credit awards and *more centralised processing* of decisions on credit awards. Experience from other countries points to the importance of applicants having access to support and guidance to enable them to describe and prove their knowledge and skills in an assessable way. Having a central entry point improves the possibilities of providing such support in the mapping phase of the validation process. More centralised processing of decisions on credit awards and credit transfers in the higher education institution is important for achieving greater equity and legal security.

Proposals and assessments of the National Delegation for Validation

A modernised regulatory framework for fair and flexible recognition

The provisions on awards of credits in the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) have been virtually unchanged for more than thirty years. This means that they do not reflect the positions established in the Lisbon Convention and Bologna process on life-long learning. Nor do they reflect the view of academic recognition as an activity that should be characterised by a generous approach and flexibility. Moreover, the provisions are not compatible with the 2012 Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes merging the provisions in Chapter 6, Sections 6 and 7 in one section, Section 7, so as to make clear that the same principle of fair and flexible recognition should apply to all credit awards irrespective of the qualifications cited by the student. The principle should also apply to all Swedish and foreign higher education irrespective of the higher education institution or the country where the programme has been completed. Credit should be granted unless there is a substantial difference between the knowledge and skills cited and the learning outcomes of the programme.

The Delegation also proposes extending the possibilities of being awarded credits to cover knowledge and skills developed in some other way than through education or in occupational activities. This can, for example, be competences developed in voluntary work or activities in associations and through various forms of self-studies. The proposal means that, in terms of the award of credits, prior learning is expressed in a similar way to in the provisions regarding prior learning as an admission requirement. This will make the regulatory framework more uniform and therefore easier to understand and apply.

In addition, the Delegation proposes an adaptation to Sweden's and the EU's Qualification Frameworks for life-long learning (SeQF/EQF). Current provisions do not make a clear distinction between learning outcomes that have been assessed and awarded a recognised qualification, on the one hand, and knowledge and skills not previously examined in a formal assessment (prior learning), on the other.

It is proposed that the new amendments enter into force on 1 January 2019.

Better reporting of credit awards

The right to be awarded credits is of great importance for the individual's possibility of progression in their studies, for mobility and for the promotion of life-long learning. At present no reliable statistics are kept about awards of credits. This makes it difficult to monitor the scale of validation and recognition of prior learning.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes entering more data about students both in the student registries of higher education institutions and in Statistics Sweden's higher education register. First, the grounds for awarding credits should follow the classification in the Higher Education Ordinance. Second, higher education institutions should also report credit awards to students in first- and second cycle courses and programmes to Statistics Sweden. The amendments are proposed to enter into force on 1 July 2019.

Further development of the Ladok student registry is required to enable the registration of data about credit awards. The Delegation therefore proposes providing support for this development work.

Long-term commission to the Swedish Council for Higher Education and further support for the development of methods and assessment criteria

Work on validation and recognition of prior learning is a long-term undertaking for the higher education sector. The task of the Swedish Council for Higher Education to promote the work of higher education institutions on recognition of prior learning should therefore be a long-term commission that is written into the Instructions for the Council as of 2019. Its commission should include the administration and further development of Valda system support. Valda creates conditions for equity and transparency in the mapping and assessment of prior learning both as an admission requirement and for the award of credits.

The National Delegation for Validation also proposes extending the Swedish Council for Higher Education's commission to support the development of methods and common assessment criteria by higher education institutions to the end of 2020. The focus of the continuation of the commission should be on supporting the development of the higher education institutions for the recognition and award of credit for previous foreign education, qualifications achieved according to the SeQF and knowledge and skills developed in occupational activities or in some other way. The commission should include further work on professional development and information activities.

Special reimbursement for credits awarded on the basis of prior learning

The intention of credit awards is that students should not need to devote time to studying courses or parts of courses where they already meet the learning outcomes. The gains from the credits being awarded, and from the programme not being longer than necessary, benefit individuals, employers and society as a whole. Calculations show that even limited awards of credits are profitable for society. However, the present resource allocation system means that a higher education institution has to bear double costs for an award of credits based on prior informal and non-formal learning. Both support and guidance of the individual in the mapping of competences and the individual assessment of knowledge and skills are time- and resource-consuming

for the higher education institution at the same time as courses awarded credits are not a basis for payments.

In the view of the National Delegation for Validation it is not socially justifiable that a student's period of study might be extended because of adverse incentives to the possibilities of awarding credits due to the resource allocation system. A special reimbursement, alongside the regular funding cap, should therefore be made to higher education institutions for awards of credits based on knowledge and skills developed in some other way than through Swedish or foreign higher education. To achieve as simple a payment system as possible, the payment should be standardised. Thus, the scale of the credit granted should not affect the size of the payment. The payment should also be uniform for all education and be based on an average cost for an assessment of prior learning for the award of credits. According to the information compiled by the Inquiry, the payment should be about SEK 15 000 per award of credits.

Monitoring and quality audit of the work of higher education institutions

A long time has passed since comprehensive monitoring was last conducted in the recognition area. External audit is needed to ensure that the Lisbon Convention's principle of fair and flexible recognition have an impact on application by higher education institutions, irrespective of whether the qualifications cited relate to knowledge and skills developed through higher education or through learning in other contexts. The results of the extensive action taken on the development of the methods and processes of higher education institutions for the assessment of prior learning also need to be followed up.

The National Delegation for Validation proposes commissioning the Swedish Higher Education Authority to carry out a thematic evaluation in 2021 of the work of higher education institutions on recognition of prior learning.

Possibilities of awarding credits in contract education

Contract education at higher education institutions is an important tool for responding to the needs of individual employers or industries for continuing professional development of their employees. Contract education can also provide a possibility of supplementary training for jobseekers who need to upgrade their competence in order to find a new job more quickly. For newly arrived immigrants with an academic qualification, contract education can provide a possibility of supplementing their training in areas where the requirements of the Swedish labour market differ from those in their home country.

At present there is no statutory possibility of awarding credits within the framework of contract education provided by higher education institutions. This limits their usefulness and extends the period of study of participants in them. In the case of continued professional development of teachers and school principals' various special solutions have been used in the past to make validation possible. However, different groups of participants in different types of situations share the need to have their prior learning assessed for credits award in contract education.

To achieve a general solution the National Delegation for Validation proposes inserting a provision on the award of credits for prior learning in the Contract Education at Universities and Institutions of Higher Education Ordinance (2002:760). The award of credits for prior learning in contract education should only be applicable if it has been regulated in the agreement between the contractor and the education provider. The amendments are proposed to enter into force on 1 January 2019.

Advance notice of award of credits

The individual needs to be able to form a picture of how extensive a coming education programme will be in order to make well-founded decisions to build on their existing competence or change their career path. This applies particularly to occupationally active people who have been working for a number of years and often have higher competence than is shown in their formal educational qualifications. It also applies to people with an education from another country who

need to have an assessment of how much of their previous education can be awarded credit towards a Swedish qualification.

At present there is no act of law or government ordinance that regulates advance notices in higher education. The right to an assessment of prior learning applies to admitted students. However, the Swedish Council for Higher Education has a commission for a pilot scheme relating to the possibilities of assessing newly arrived immigrants who have incomplete documentation of their studies or who have started but not completed their studies. The intention is that everyone who needs to have prior education or competences developed in other contexts assessed should be able to use the model developed. The National Delegation for Validation's assessments relate to how activities with advance notices of credit awards should be organised after the end of the pilot scheme.

A central point of entry is needed for statements of advance notices

Awards of credits are administrative decisions that can only be taken by a higher education institution when the individual has been admitted to a programme. Advance notice of knowledge and skills that can be awarded credits in a higher education programme should therefore be given in the form of a statement issued by the Swedish Council for Higher Education. This establishes a central point of entry that simplifies matters for people who are in need of an advance notice. A central point of entry is also a guarantee of equitable processing of an application for advance notice of credits awarded. At the same time, it avoids the risk of duplication because the individual applies for advance notice from several higher education institutions.

The Swedish Council for Higher Education's present statements of completed foreign qualifications enjoy a high level of confidence among higher education institutions. However, the National Delegation for Validation considers that an investigation should be made of how these statements of recognition can be given clearer legal status since this would increase legal certainty for the individual.

Some higher education institution should be tasked with carrying out assessments

The Swedish Council for Higher Education has a great deal of knowledge about education systems and qualifications in different countries. However, in the case of statements in the form of advance notices of awards of credits, the assessment of the applicant's knowledge and skills should be made in relation to the learning outcomes of a particular study programme or course. The assessment needs to be made by subject experts who are well acquainted with the intended learning outcomes in their disciplinary domains to enable the Swedish Council for Higher Education to issue an advance notice based on their assessment.

Both efficiency and quality reasons argue for concentrating the assessment work. As of 2021 some higher education institutions should therefore be given special commissions to carry out the assessment of prior learning for an advance notice for the award of credits. These higher education institutions should receive a separate reimbursement for each assessment performed.

Fees justified for statements of advance notices of awards of credits

Making an assessment of the knowledge and skills that an individual has developed in contexts other than higher education is a resource-consuming task. The Inquiry describes experience from France, Flanders and elsewhere, where people who have not been admitted to higher education can have their competence examined for the award of credits towards a qualification. Both countries charge applicants fees.

The Delegation for Validation considers that fees can be justified regarding an assessment for an advance notice. A fee can prevent excessive use and a validation process being started and then broken off by the individual when they realise that describing and documenting their competence in an assessable way is relatively demanding. However, full cost recovery should not be applied. The Swedish Council for Higher Education should be authorised to charge fees as of 2021 for statements of advance notices of awards of credits.