

Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning

1. Introduction

UNorthwest is a provider of non-formal or non-traditional education delivered through supported open and distance learning for professional, undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. According to the European Union, non-formal education programs are highly demanded by adult learners. Non-formal education programs do not follow the contents and requirements established by a National Ministry of Education or Science.

The programs offered by UNorthwest are international in content and scope. The efficiency of a learning system as applied by the University has been accumulated by the European Union as a reference standpoint for adult education as laid down in the **European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)**. This achievement constitutes a clear indicator of the efficiency of the UNorthwest educational activities in adult and continuing education.

Countries around Europe are increasingly emphasizing the need to take account of the full range of an individual's knowledge, skills and competences – not only those acquired at schools, universities or other formal education and training institutions. Recognizing all forms of learning is therefore a priority of EU action in education and training. The European Qualifications Framework therefore encourages lifelong learning by promoting the [validation of non-formal learning](#) like the one provided by the University of Northwest Europe.

UNorthwest's educational approaches are centered around the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), as adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in 2008, which is including the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and the assignment of qualifications to qualification levels which were achieved under national education systems.

2. What is Validation of non-formal and informal Learning?

Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning is the process of identifying, assessing and accrediting an individual's competencies, knowledge and skills, no matter how these have been acquired. This process is also widely known under the term APEL, which stand for "Accreditation" of Prior Experiential Learning, i.e. the un-certificated learning made by the individual, and basically refers to all previously acquired learning.

The validation process means flexibility. It gives the evaluating institution the flexibility to consider all aspects of an individual's background in the search for exemptions against pre-determined requirements. Combined with the flexibility inherent with the open, online, and distance learning as applied by UNorthwest means that you can start on a program at the most appropriate point, and achieve completion by the most direct route.

These opportunities offered by a validation process have implications for a whole host of other people:

- Immigrants in an educational system unknown to them may be highly qualified in their country of origin, but unable to prove this where they are now.
- Those in part-time employment, who generally suffer reduced training and development benefits, will be able to capitalize fully on a validation/distance learning program.
- This also means that people with disabilities, who tend to work part-time, if at all, will be able to enrol on a program without having to first find the physically most suitable institution relative to their needs.
- The self-employed, who certainly cannot take the time off to undertake residential studies, and even if they consider part-time studies would not want to repeat what they have already covered as a matter of course in running their business.

- The unemployed, for whom the flexibility of a validation process by distance learning means that they would still be able to pursue a career whilst working towards a degree qualification.

3. What qualifies for validation?

Experience is not necessarily learning, and it is important to set out at an early stage that what is assessed under a validation scheme is the candidate's ability to prove that any experience has resulted in learning.

Such evidence could fall within the following three broad categories:

1. Existing certificated learning: certificates issued by recognized examining bodies are, where appropriate, used to grant entry or exemption only. Other certificates, licences or test results may provide evidence of skills or competence and may, subject to evaluation, be used for the award of credit.
2. Prior learning achievement for which evidence is readily available: examples of materials within this category are:
 - a. testimonials or other authenticated reports of achievements acquired in the past. Many testimonials submitted for evaluation are very general, and in consequence of little value. Specifically solicited testimonials, addressing clearly identified competences or skills are preferred;
 - b. presentation of products which demonstrate achievement, such as written or published material, computer programs, designs, objects, artefacts, etc.
3. Prior learning achievement which is claimed but for which there is no direct evidence: the bulk of prior learning achievement will probably come within this category. A student will need guidance to reflect upon and set down relevant experiences in a structured manner, in order that claimed skills or competencies can be identified and assessed. The significance of the term 'relevant' will depend upon the units for which credit or exemption is sought, but sources of prior learning achievement might include:
 - a. experience gained in the workplace;
 - b. informal or non-credit-bearing courses such as in-company training schemes or adult education;
 - c. independent and self-directed study, correspondence courses;
 - d. experiences such as voluntary work.

Wherever possible, the student should map the competencies represented by uncertified learning to existing college courses. This can be done by examining the syllabuses of other colleges in the relevant areas and selecting courses to "challenge" through portfolio.

The University does not restrict portfolio assessment to areas where standardized tests do not exist, nor does it restrict assessment based on the credits that an applicant may already have earned save that the same credit cannot be counted twice during a program for the same competency (however, some learning experiences will result in credit that is due in more than one competency). In theory, almost any area is capable of being assessed by portfolio, although obviously the nature of evidence required will change accordingly.

4. The procedure

There is a specific procedure to go through when wishing to be considered for Validation credits against a degree program:

1. The candidate makes the claim to have acquired knowledge and skill, and supplies evidence for the claim.
2. The candidate should remember that the validation process aims to evaluate learning, not experience. If no learning can be ascribed to a particular experience, there is nothing to evaluate, and the candidate cannot make a claim on that basis.
3. Identifying learning outcomes is possible only through systematic reflection on experience. There are three stages to this reflection:
 - Experiences are looked at and those where learning has occurred are selected;
 - Clear statements are written about what was actually learned;
 - Evidence in support of the claim to learning is collected and collated.
4. A focused piece of writing should normally be submitted. This must satisfy the following criteria:
 - Authenticity : It must be the candidate's own work;
 - Quality : It should be at degree level;
 - Breadth : A balance between theoretical knowledge and practical application should be evident;
 - Directness : It should focus on areas taught within the degree program;
 - Currency : Learning should have been kept up to date.

Step 1: Basic information

Prepare a full CV or resume. This should include all areas for which the candidate will attempt to claim credit. The University provides a **Portfolio Form** for validation purposes.

Step 2: Detailed information

Provide a detailed description of activities, paid and unpaid work, periods of study, voluntary work, social activities and hobbies for which a claim for credit will be attempted. Candidates should identify experiences, detailing what they did, what was learned and how that learning was achieved. Sources of supplementary evidence should be indicated where relevant. See below for a (non-exhaustive) list of activities that may have led to learning of some form.

Step 3: Record of learning

This should be a focused piece of writing which puts the learning the candidate has achieved into context. It should draw all supporting evidence produced into an academic framework, properly referenced and clearly demonstrating how the learning has progressed. In order to do this, candidates need to reflect on their experience to identify where significant learning has occurred. Learning involves more than just doing. It is not enough to know that a particular procedure is important, the student must show they understand why.

Step 4: Sources of evidence

This could be certificates or transcripts of training programs, log books, reports produced, surveys carried out, job descriptions, letters of verification, testimonials, etc.

5. The validation process

Having received all of the above, the UNorthwest will make a formal evaluation of the candidate's existing qualifications against the requirements of a degree program. A jury will meet to consider the portfolio and will conduct verification and seek any additional information from the candidate that is necessary.

Following this evaluation, the candidate will be advised of the result. The result may be the award of the complete degree desired (at bachelor's level or below only), or partial degree credit (up to 30% of a master's degree program), a complete degree at a lower level, or no degree at all.

If the candidate falls short of their desired standard in the award of validation credit, the UNorthwest will advise as to what amount of work is needed to reach the degree requirements and the additional fees that may be payable.

6. How learning may have been accumulated

6.1. Work related learning

A large proportion of the abilities and skills needed to hold down a job are often the very same that universities and colleges try to convey to students. The list of such skills is endless, but could include for example accounting, computer operating/programming, filing, financial management, stock control, planning, sales, typing etc. etc.

6.2. Volunteer work

Church activities, social service work, hospital work, community activities, political campaigns and the like. All of these may involve activities that lead to learning.

6.3. Homemaking

Organizing and maintaining a household is no mean task, although often one taken for granted. There is a large element of organizational skills required, together with planning and budgeting, psychology, communication, education etc.

6.4. Travel

This relates not to a mindless package tour to the nearest sunny poolside, but to the concept of travel as it was originally formed. Travel can be a great former of personality, and offers vast learning potential. Have you been on any study tours, important/significant holiday or business trip? Have you lived in other countries for prolonged periods? There may be learning experiences to be described.

6.5. Learning in formal settings

All on-the-job training falls under this heading. Workshops, seminars, conferences and conventions, radio/TV courses followed, your tape-based language-course, and more.

6.6. Discussion with subject experts

The topic is less important than the concept of your spending significant time in the pursuit of specific knowledge in the company of a subject expert. The old mentoring system still holds many benefits, and crucial learning may be extracted via this method, including some which is not readily available through other sources.

6.7. Hobbies and related activities

Do you play an instrument? Can you fly an aircraft? Most people do not realize just how much they have learned in their pursuit of spare time activities, much of which may be acceptable for credit against some course or other. What can you do that required learning?

6.8. General study

This could be any area in which you have done some level of study, and can demonstrate some learning. Many people have a specific interest in some element that they see as a hobby, but which may have brought them to a level of insight quite commensurate with that held by people with qualifications in the same field. Just think of successful quiz-show contestants - do they tend to be graduates, or people from

all walks of life, who happen to have a strong interest in and knowledge about something? What is your special interest?

6.9. Any other way that you can demonstrate to have led to a learning experience

The following forms of evidence can help you with the documentation of your learning outcomes:

- audio tapes/CD-ROMs
- awards
- certificates
- commendations
- copies of speeches and publications
- copies of tests
- course details/outlines
- designs and blueprints
- endorsements
- exhibitions
- films
- honors
- interviews
- job descriptions
- licenses
- military records
- patents and copyrights
- photos
- samples of work
- slides
- testimonials
- videotapes
- works of art

And generally any other form of documentation or evidence you can think of, and which could be considered as “experiential learning”.