Validating Knowledge and Competencies
The Validationcentre in Sweden

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Résumé

The negative effects of restructuring and redundancies on displaced workers' chances in the labour market have been highlighted and it has been argued that one of the most important factors influencing individuals' capacity to re-enter the labour market after dismissals is their skills and knowledge. In line with these developments, and the focus on knowledge and competencies when it comes to promoting and maintaining employability, more and more interest has been directed by academics and practitioners alike towards different practices, methods, and tools aimed at accounting for the knowledge resources at the disposal of a worker, a group or organization and determining in which way these can be deemed valuable. One such practice that received increased attention is the validation of knowledge and competencies. In Sweden, validation was defined as "the structured assessment, evaluation, documentation and acknowledgement of knowledge and competencies independent of where they have been acquired".

In this report we investigate the validation phenomenon in Sweden by presenting a study of a project aimed at developing validation practice in the Göteborg Region of Western Sweden. The project included a large number of predominantly regional actors, the Public Employment Service (PES), the social partners, regional development organisations, etc. involved with establishing methods and tools for validation as a means of facilitating more transparency and flexibility on the labour market, ensuring a better supply of knowledge and competencies deemed strategically important for companies and the whole region and providing previously marginalised groups, such as immigrants and long-term unemployed with an opportunity to re-enter the labour market.

We show how the different perspectives on validation are negotiated and combined in order to present validation as a solution to a range of problems and how the cooperation among the different actors led to the establishment of a new regional actor engaging in validation activities: the Validationcentre.

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Introduction

It has become widely accepted among academics, practitioners, and policymakers that knowledge is a useful thing for people, companies and countries to have[1]. Business leaders and managers claim that more and *better* knowledge development activities are of utmost importance for maintaining a firm's competitiveness in the global marketplace. Many researchers (e.g. Nonaka, 1995; Von Krogh & Roos, 1996 Meyers, 1996; Prusak, 1997; Earl & Scott, 1999; Dixon, 2000) claim that in order to continue to "play at the top of the league," to increase productivity and flexibility, companies must retain, develop, organize and exploit the knowledge of the employees. In other words, management is inclined to continuously improve the ways in which the knowledge in their possession is managed. This often includes competence shift programs, workforce reductions or other restructuring activities. Employee representatives too have recognised the needs of employers to adjust their workforce based on the competencies and knowledge at their disposal and have increasingly pointed to the importance of training and competence development for their members in order to avoid, or at least minimise the negative impact of restructuring by quickly getting workers re-employed.[2]

The negative effects of restructuring and redundancies on displaced workers' chances in the labour market have been highlighted. Studies of job loss in the US found that displaced workers experience more non-employment than does the general working population, but the differences are smaller during expansions than during recessions (Farber, 1993) and appear to fade away by four or so years following displacement (Ruhm, 1991). However, the durations of joblessness among displaced workers vary greatly. Many experience no joblessness at all, while a significant number experience very long periods without employment (Swaim & Podgursky, 1991).

One of the most important factors influencing individuals' capacity to re-enter the labour market after dismissals is their skills and knowledge. On the one hand workers may not

[1] This phenomenon can be illustrated by numerous examples such as the survey on "Knowledge Management Practices in Ministries/Departments/Agencies of Central Government" commissioned by the OECD in 2002, or the debates at the European Council meeting 2002 in Lisbon (see Rodrigues, 2002).

[2] In Sweden this has become apparent among others in the context of workforce reductions: in more and more cases the LIFO rule stipulated by the labour protection legislation (LAS) is circumvented and redundancies are instead made based on the level of competence of the workers. In order for the trade unions to agree on this, they are in turn promised support in helping the redundant employees into new employment.

have the relevant skills for the new employers and therefore, in order to increase their chances to get a new job they need to undergo occupational training or education. On the other hand, workers may have the right skills, but since they have acquired them on the job without formal training, they may not always be documented in formalised certificates. Furthermore, since knowledge and skills are often acquired in informal ways, it is difficult to adjust training programs to the needs of individuals. This is particularly true for companies employing a majority of workers with less formal training.

In line with these developments, and the focus on knowledge and competencies when it comes to promoting and maintaining employability, more and more interest has been directed by academics and practitioners alike towards different practices, methods, and tools aimed at accounting for the knowledge resources at the disposal of a worker, a group or organization and determining in which way these can be deemed valuable (see Esping-Andersen, 2002, Rodrigues, 2002). One such practice that received increased attention is the validation of knowledge and competencies, independent of where or how they have been acquired.

Validation has come to be viewed as a legitimate organizing activity from many different perspectives. From a societal perspective, within the European Union, the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been identified as priority on a number of occasions, including the *Communication on Lifelong Learning* (2001), the *Education Council Decision: Concrete future objectives for European education and training systems* (2002) and the *Copenhagen Declaration* (2002). Among others it is seen by policy makers, consultants, and managers as permitting a better management of the changes taking place in the labour market and in everyday work life and leading to an increase in employment (see e.g. ETUC, 2002; European Commission, 2004). From a company perspective validation is seen as a set of tools and methods for ensuring a continuous supply of knowledge and skills demanded by the organization. From an individual perspective validation is understood as giving persons the opportunity to get proof of their competencies and thereby increase their competitiveness on the labour market and their chances of (re)gaining employment within ones area of competence.

Looking at the situation in Europe, one problem identified is that dismissed workers are not able to find jobs because their skills and competencies are not formally recognised. This problem seems to be common across national borders and institutional settings. However, different approaches are used to solve this problem in the different European countries. The important differences lie in who is assumed to be responsible for providing training opportunities as well as the possibility of having ones knowledge and skills acknowledged.

In this report we investigate the validation phenomenon in Sweden by presenting a study of a project aimed at developing validation practice in the Göteborg Region of Western Sweden. The project included a large number of predominantly regional actors, the Public Employment Service (PES), the social partners, regional development organisations, etc. involved with establishing methods and tools for validation as a means of facilitating more transparency and flexibility on the labour market, ensuring a better supply of knowledge and competencies deemed strategically important for companies and the whole region and providing previously marginalised groups, such as immigrants and long-term unemployed with an opportunity to re-enter the labour market. Validation itself was defined by the actors involved as "the structured assessment, evaluation, documentation and acknowledgement of knowledge and competencies independent of where they have been acquired" (see e.g. Tursell, 2005).

Although they oriented themselves around a common definition, the different actors represented different albeit related perspectives when it came to the benefits they connected with validation. From a labour market perspective, validation was understood as promoting flexibility and mobility. From a company perspective validation was seen as a set of tools and methods for ensuring a continuous supply of knowledge and skills demanded by the organization. From an individual perspective validation was understood as giving workers the opportunity to get proof of their competencies and thereby increase their competitiveness on the labour market and their chances of gaining employment within their area of competence.

In this report we show how the different perspectives on validation are negotiated and combined in order to present validation as a solution to a range of problems and how the cooperation among the different actors led to the establishment of a new regional actor engaging in validation activities: the Validationcentre.

The report is based on 16 interviews with managers and handling officers at the Validationcentre, the Public Employment Service (PES), the Adult Education Department and the Göteborg City Council who work with the validation of knowledge and competencies as part of the everyday work activities. We also observed seven seminars, workshops and meetings at which validation was presented as a "successful" model, a remedy for many of the problems experienced by companies today. The largest part of the empirical study focused on the collection and analysis of documents in the form of official reports such as public inquiries and informational material in the form of brochures and homepages.

Validation in Sweden

In correspondence to the European developments validation also grew in significance in Swedish society, gaining a more prominent roll as part of the *Kunskapslyftet* (Knowledge Lift), an ambitious program for adult learning launched by the Swedish Ministry for Education 1996. The purpose of the program was to use adult education as tool aimed at creating a labour force better adapted for the "new" knowledge economy thereby decreasing Swedish unemployment rates and increasing the country's international competitiveness (SOU, 2001:78). Since then, validation has grown significantly in importance in the public debate. One explanation for this development is that a number of powerful and influential actors positioned themselves in support of validation, because they regarded it as a solution to a number of related problems.

The Swedish Labour Market Board (AMS) and its local Public Employment Services (PES) saw validation mainly as a tool to establish and support a more transparent and flexible labour market. This understanding is important for two reasons: Firstly, in reference to official statistics AMS argued that a large proportion of the labour force will have retired by 2015; according to their estimates around 300 000 – 400 000 workers out of a total of around four million workers. AMS expects this to result in large-scale labour shortages. Secondly, during the same timeframe AMS also expects a continuing restructuring of the organisations of production and labour market in Sweden, which by itself is presumed to put greater demands and expectations for occupational flexibility and geographical mobility on the labour force. According to AMS, the number of people changing employment will be at the level of 10-12 percent during periods of strong economic growth. In addition too this external mobility, there is also to be expected considerable movement within companies and organisations internal workforce.

AMS saw validation as a method to address both these problems. Since one of the important characteristics attributed to validation was its potential for visualising knowledge, competencies and skills already imbedded in individuals, it was argued that validation would increase the number of workers with relevant competencies and make it possible to match these workers more smoothly with potential work opportunities. In other words, validation makes a larger part of the potential labour force available for work and thereby supports the entrance of new groups previously marginalised and unemployed onto the labour market.

Validation, by the same virtue, is seen to make way for a more efficient matching of labour and work on the labour market, and thereby supports the much wanted flexibility and mobility within the working population.

In line with this view the *Confederation of Swedish Enterprises* (Svenskt Näringsliv) argued for the importance of validation from the user perspective. Validation, if implemented and used in a "correct" manner, was expected first of all to make it easier for employers to identify and evaluate potential employees in order to establish if they met the skills, experience and knowledge requested by the employer. Secondly, validation was also seen as potentially more oriented towards the type of practical skills and knowledge that companies view as important and relevant in contemporary work life, and less concerned with the traditional curriculum of the public school system and the university.

Not surprisingly, the unions, on the other hand, had a slightly different focus in their support for validation. Their position mainly emphasised the potential advantages and positive effects that validation could bring about for its members, especially in terms of increased mobility on the labour market and personal development. Furthermore, union representatives stressed the potential of validation for making the workers' experiences and their skills gathered at the workplace explicit and visible. In this way the workers could "know what they know" and could develop their skills accordingly in order to ensure their employability on the labour market.

However, even though the various social partners and public actors increasingly regarded validation as potentially positive and useful, the attempts for wider implementation of validation techniques did not pass without debate and negotiations. Especially questions related to the legitimacy of validation and quality control of the methods and tools used in the process were in focus. Important questions were, for example: Who should be given the responsibility of developing the methods and tools for validation? Who was to be entrusted with carrying out validation of skills and competencies? Who would monitor validation activities in the future, and ensure its quality and legitimacy?

Because of these discussions, the Swedish government set up the *Swedish National Commission on Validation* (Valideringsdelegationen) in December 2003. One of the main goals of the commission was to initiate, organise and carry out development- and diffusion activities aimed at increasing the quality, equivalency and legitimacy of the validation of adults' competencies and knowledge. Validation itself was defined on the commission's homepage as "a precise assessment, valuing, documentation and recognition of knowledge and competences that an individual has gained, irrespective of how and where they have been acquired" (www.valideringsdelegationen.se/om_oss/in_english.htm, accessed 2006-05-20). The commission had the task of developing quality control processes and more generally establishing a framework for ensuring the legitimacy of validation. The commission received

a budget of 70 million SEK for this purpose and it was expected to conclude its work by the end of 2007. By this date it was assumed that the concept of validation would have a strong enough foothold in Sweden.

The Validationcentre in the Göteborg Region

One region of the country where validation practice was developed the furthest was the Göteborg Region in Western Sweden. In 1998 the Swedish Ministry for Education commissioned the establishment of a Validationcentre in the region as part of the *Kunskapslyftet* mentioned above. Since then around ten of these centres have sprung up throughout the country. The Validationcentre in Göteborg was the largest of these centres and was considered to be in the forefront of the development of methods and tools for validating the skills and competencies of individuals (see Tursell, 2005). In 2005 the centre employed 9 people on a project basis, one project leader, and a number of method developers and validation guides, and validated 1 200 persons. The persons working at the Validationcentre were on a loan from their regular employers, other organisations and authorities in the region.

Many observers highlighted the fact that the work with establishing validation in the Göteborg Region was characterised from the very beginning by cooperation between the social partners and a strong focus on qualification requirements other than those expressed in more traditional educational settings (Tursell, 2005). The work was organised as a cooperation project including a number of different actors. The project was headed by a steering group consisting of representatives from the social partners as well as municipal and regional authorities and organisations. Until the autumn of 2003 the project was financed through support from the EU.

The steering group was given an important role in giving advice on issues concerning the development and sophistication of the project. Its members were also seen as important links between the project and all the other networks in the region with interests in the project. But, above all, the steering group representatives fulfilled an important role in giving legitimacy to the Validationcentre project with regards to industry. Over the years some of its members left and were replaced by new ones. In 2006 they included representatives from the Public Employment Services, Business Region Göteborg (BRG), the Labour Board (Länsarbetsnämnden), Landsorganisationen (LO), TCO, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, (Företagarna), Teknikföretagen, Västra Götalandsregionen, the Göteborg Region Municipal Council and Göteborg University.

Among others the centre's task was to organise and lead the development of methods and models for validation, to ensure quality control of validation processes as well as certify the "validators" and "validation supervisors", to take care of the applicants for the validation process, to issue competence certificate, market and spread knowledge about validation.

The validation of knowledge and competencies was described as a method of evaluating and documenting informal knowledge and skills through grades or through different industry-specific documents. According to the Validationcentre, the process was characterised by a focus on acknowledging knowledge, taking into account the industry's requirements on what kinds of knowledge and skills are needed to engage in certain work activities, a demonstration of these knowledge and skills in a real work environment, and the evaluation of knowledge gained either through formal education or at work (www.valideringscentrum.nu, accessed 2006-05-20).

The Validation Process

Suggestions about which occupations to validate were presented to the Validationcentre via a number of different channels. These suggestions were sent to one of the occupation committees (yrkesberedningsgrupper). The committees were commissioned by the steering group on labour market policy of the Göteborg Region's municipal council. The occupation committees' task was to establish what types of knowledge and competencies the industry in Göteborg demanded. The committees also had the task of identifying the need for validation in each sector. The committees consisted of representatives from the social partners, the PES and the Municipal Adult Education Department (Vuxenutbildningen) and represented different occupational fields such as "trade and administration (including IT)", "service and crafts", "healthcare", "technology and production" and "construction" (Håkansson *et al*., 2004).

Apart from outlining the need for validation in each occupational field, supporting the training of validation supervisors and facilitating contact between the supervisors, partaking in the development of methods and tools for validation and taking responsibility for ensuring the quality of the process, the members of the occupation committees were also responsible for establishing or further developing networks in the Göteborg Region and strengthening cooperation between the municipalities in the region, the industry representatives and the PES with respect to the development of new forms of training and other educational activities and projects.

When suggestions came in on new occupations to be validated in, the committee discussed the proposals among themselves and then informed the steering group about their

ideas. The steering group determined which occupations were to be included in the validation process. When the choice, of which “new” occupation to include in the validation process was made, the method developer in the occupation committee was given the task of establishing a workgroup to develop methods for validating persons who fitted into that occupational group. Until the end of 2005 methods and tools for validation, such as grades, professional- and competence certificate as well as merit portfolios had been developed within around 20 different occupational fields.

One of the important issues was that the employer representatives in the committees had to ensure that there were companies within the industry in question willing to take in candidates for validation.

Bringing the Workplace into the Picture– the “Validation Companies”

In order to do so, employers were offered the opportunity of becoming “validation companies”. The idea was to sign agreements with employers in the Göteborg Region in order to open their workplaces for validation. For example, if a car manufacturer wanted to validate the knowledge and skills of welders working in their company, it could contact the Validationcentre with their request. Thereupon, the centre’s employees together with industry specialists did a workplace analysis at the company in order to establish whether or not it qualified as a validation company. The requirements on which the analysis was based were related to the industry in question. Would it be possible to validate the knowledge and competencies of welders in the workplace at this company? If yes, an agreement was signed between the Validationcentre and the employer. On the basis of this agreement a number of validation supervisors were trained and certified by the Validationcentre’s experts. These supervisors were employees of the company; persons considered as experts within the occupational field to be validated.

The agreement meant that the company was able to have the knowledge and competencies of their employees (in this case of the welders in their organisation) validated on the basis of the criteria developed by the Validationcentre’s method developers. The company also committed itself to opening its workplace to validants from other companies who wanted to be validated as welders. By signing agreements with the companies and training and certifying some of their employees as validation supervisors, the Validationcentre established long-term relationships with employers in the region and thereby contributed to the establishment of a strong network around validation in the Göteborg Region.

Volvo Cars in Göteborg, one of the largest employers in the region, was among the first companies to become a “validation company”. Within the company’s HR/Personnel

department the feeling was that the market for production technicians to work on the assembly lines had been exhausted in the region. By becoming a "validation company" they saw the opportunity to recruit persons who otherwise would not have applied for a job at the company because they did not have documentation outlining their competencies. By becoming a "validation company" Volvo not only gave its own employees the opportunity to get their competencies validated within an occupation were competencies had previously not been documented, but also opened its doors to validants from outside the company. Of the 60 persons who were validated as production technicians in 2005 at Volvo, 60% were subsequently given employment at the company.[3] Because of the positive results at Volvo, another large car manufacturer in the region, SAAB, as well as the truck manufacturer, Scania, have shown interest in developing validation for product technicians in the automobile sector further and extending the number of occupations within which validation can be undertaken.

Let us now take a closer look at the validation process itself. The process can be distinguished into five parts: recruitment, mapping, assessment and validation and supplementary educational activities.

Recruitment

Validants (name given to the candidates for validation) are recruited from three organisations: the PES, the employers in the region and the Adult Education Department. According to Håkansson *et al.*, (2004), the amount of candidates for validation from the different organisations shifted over the years. In 2005 approximately half of the total number of 1 200 validants came from the PES, 30% were registered by their employers, and 20% registered privately through the Municipal Adult Education Department. During the recruitment phase the validants were given information about the process by the employees of the Validationcentre.

Mapping Knowledge and Competencies

Before a person's knowledge and competencies could be validated it had to be determined what kind of knowledge and skills he or she brings along to the process. In order to get a better picture about what a validant knew, an employee of the Validationcentre, together with a handling officer from the PES or a guide from the Adult Education Department, depending

3 It should be kept in mind that the validants who go through validation at a validation company do not necessarily seek employment at the company. Some of the validants are already employed and wish to document their competencies, others are unemployed but would like to work at another company, etc.

on which organisation registered the validant at the Validationcentre, went through the persons knowledge, skills and previous professional experiences. This was done above all by mapping the knowledge and skills through conversations and documentation.

Assessing Knowledge and Competencies

Once a person's knowledge and skills had been mapped and described they were assessed in relation to the requirements stipulated by the occupational field in question. Together with an occupational expert (teacher) the validant went through a process of determining what kind of knowledge and skills he or she possessed and how these fitted with the requirements of the occupation he or she was interested in. The assessments could differ depending on which occupational group was in focus, and could include individual conversations, group discussions with other participants or written self-evaluation exercises. The material produced through this process formed the basis for the "individual validation plan", a plan of action that formed the basis of the future validation process and had to been approved by the Validationcentre.

Validation

Once a person's plan of action was approved, the validation process could take place in three different ways: on the basis of grades, on the basis of competence certificates and on the basis of so-called merit portfolios. The first one was used in cases where the occupation to be validated existed as a high school education. In these cases there existed documents which outlined concrete goals, course outlines etc. The participants were gives grades for the courses that were validated. The second method, the validation on the basis of "competence certificates", was used when the knowledge and skills to be validated were not part of formal educational programs. Validation was in this case carried out on the basis of the requirements developed together with representatives from the industry in question. Finally, validation on the basis of merit portfolios was used when the knowledge and skills in question could not be compared with any high school subjects or the requirements of industry. The merit portfolio was a tool used by the method developers in order to make the knowledge, skills and competencies of a person seeking employment visible. The process usually took around four weeks and consisted of courses and seminars aimed at giving the individual the opportunity of reflecting about what he or she had achieved in the past and more importantly *how* this had been achieved. The result was a physical portfolio including long, detailed descriptions of a

person's merits such as his or her "general competencies"[4], prior work experience or more personal experiences.

The validation period lasted between three and six weeks depending on how much was validated. More theoretical knowledge could be validated without tests. Instead the validant attended seminars and wrote "logbooks" in order to relate the theoretical knowledge with his past practical experiences. For occupations that were validated on the basis of competence certificates, there were no course plans to follow. Instead the method developers established and sophisticated "realistic" practical examples or scenarios that could be applied at a workplace taking in validants for validation. In each case the validation was supervised by teachers from the suppliers of the educational services.

Supplementary Studies

Once a person's knowledge and skills have been validated she then has the opportunity to engage in further studies in order to develop her competence. For this purpose the supplier of the educational services is contacted and sits down with the validated person in order to discuss how to proceed.

Validation was understood as a solution to a whole range of problems relating to the situation of workers on the labour market. Firstly, it was seen as ensuring that unemployed persons and participants in labour market programs gained new employment, a training position or became self-employed more quickly. Secondly, validation was seen as facilitating the return to employment for persons in need of rehabilitation. Thirdly, it was seen as facilitating the transition of workers from one job to another job, to an education or to self-employment.

Validation as a Basis for Regional Cooperation

Over the past few years a number of other development projects have been coordinated by the actors in the region around the concept of validation. For example, the Validationcentre together with the Business Region Göteborg (BRG) worked with promoting the Göteborg Region as an important business region by setting up a project on "Strategisk kompetensförsörjning" (Strategic Competence Support). The project aimed at developing a process for guaranteeing that firms had access to the right competence at the right place and the right time in order to achieve their business goals. As a part of this work the two

4 These "general competencies" consisted of ten types of competence that had been defined by the Validation Commission, the social partners and researchers from the University of Linköping. They included more subjective, implicit competencies such as quality consciousness, the ability to handle information or the ability to solve practical problems,

organizations gave the Swedish Standards Institute (SIS) the task to develop a new standard, a standard for competence support. The SIS is a non-profit organisation with around 1 300 members in Sweden. It represents the interests of its Swedish members in the international standardisation networks, the CEN and ISO. By participating in these networks and being a member of among others the ISO Council and the CEN Administrator Board, SIS believes that Swedish companies and other organizations and authorities are able to influence the standards that are developed within their particular areas. The fact that they were given the task of developing the *Management System for Competence Support (SS 61 40 70)* standard provided a unique opportunity for the institute to develop a new standard on their own.

From January 2005 onwards the Strategic Competence Support project became part of the activities of the Validationcentre in Göteborg. The centre, with its methods and tools for assessing, documenting and recognising knowledge and competencies independent of where they had been acquired, on the one hand and the SS 62 40 70 on the other hand, were seen as complementing each other well. The step of merging the two was described as "logical" as the validation of knowledge and skills was seen as a "natural part" of an organisation's work with fulfilling the criteria needed to be certified in accordance with SS 62 40 70. Also, the Validationcentre was to ensure the impartiality of the audits and that the auditors were "sufficiently competent" to undertake audits based on SS 62 40 70, as well as make sure that the audited organisation fulfilled the requirements on competence according to the standard. The development of a standard was not only important on a local level; it provided *all* organisations working with validation with legitimate and standardised tools.

Another project that was coordinated by the Validationcentre in cooperation with important actors in the region was the development of validation processes for production technicians within the automotive industry. Volvo Cars, Volvo AB (the part of Volvo that was not sold to Ford), SAAB and Scania participated in this so-called Mera Project.

Discussion – Validation Practice in Europe: A Question of Responsibility and Legitimacy

In this paper we have presented a study of the establishment of the Validationcentre in the Göteborg Region of western Sweden. We have shown how this came about as a result of collaboration between representatives from the social partners, the PES and municipal authorities and other organizations. Part of the explanation for why validation was increasingly portrayed as important by the actors may be traced to the fact that validation was described as a "new" method for dealing with some problems at the heart of Swedish public

debate. Validation addressed the questions of knowledge and life long learning, both regarded as extremely important when it came to developing and sustaining the country's international competitiveness. Furthermore, validation was seen as beneficial when tackling problems associated with high unemployment rates and exclusion, as well as ensuring transparency and flexibility on the labour market. As part of the claims expressed in the rhetoric and logic surrounding the concept of validation, it was portrayed as a means of achieving social equality and fairness, as a tool making it possible for individuals and groups traditionally marginalised to enter into higher education or onto the labour market. Furthermore, it was presented as a valuable tool in the context of restructuring activities such as competence shift programs, internal transition programs and workforce reductions on the basis of employees' competence as opposed to the strict adherence of the Swedish labour employment protection legislation.

These overarching expectations of what could be accomplished by making use of validation motivated and legitimated the interest and involvement of the different actors. The fact that the expectations were manifold and broad in nature meant that that the different issues and aspects pertaining to validation were connected to variety of different interest, perspectives and expectations as many different actors were attracted by them. At the same time the broadness of the ideas surrounding validation may also be seen as a source of conflicts and problems. In order for broad ideas and concepts to be translated into actual practice they have to be concretised, a process that may be expected to bring more subtle, underlying differences between the various actors to the fore. For example, actors might differ on questions such as who gets to decide what is relevant knowledge or competence, or who should be responsible for the development of validation tools and methods, thereby giving rise to conflicts of interest. Thus, a bottom up approach when it comes to the creation and development of methods and concepts for the validation of competencies and knowledge proved important in order to legitimate the Validationcentre existence and organise validation practice as a whole in the Göteborg Region. By involving companies and representatives from the employer associations in the in the development of Validationcentre in the work of the steering committee as well as in the occupation committees they became engaged not only in principle, they were also able to directly influence the design of the validation activities.

This held also true for the other social partners, the PES, the Municipal Adult Education Department and the other regional authorities and organizations. Since the Validationcentre was developed by using established regional networks of actors representing a variety of different perspectives on validation, a number of potential conflicts and problems where

confronted from the very beginning, negotiated and more or less resolved during the process. As a consequence, validation became a legitimate organising activity not only on an abstract level but also in practice. Furthermore, the Validationcentre itself became a positive example – a "best practice" – for implementing tools and methods of validation on a national level. Thereby, the concrete, local example gave legitimacy to the grand, but rather abstract concept of validation.

This approach towards implementing validation differs when compared to other countries in the EC. In France for example, laws were passed in 2002 on the "recognition of work derived experience" placing the responsibility in the hands of the state. The state afforded every employee the right to have his or her work derived experience recognised by means of a national diploma. The criticism levelled against the French system was that it was a top down approach and that the employers were often left out of the equation. They had a rather limited influence on what was delivered in schools, colleges and universities.

In contrast to the French system, in the United Kingdom, the responsibility for evaluating and documenting knowledge and competencies of workers and the organising of training activities rested mainly with the trade unions. Since 1997 the Labour government in the UK has promoted the ideas surrounding the concept of lifelong learning as a means of ensuring employability and social inclusion (see e.g. Rainbird, 1999). The following years saw the establishment of the *UK Learning Fund* to finance, administer and organise the development of Union Learning Representatives (ULR) systems. URLs were workers elected by the trade unions and trained and put in charge of analysing the learning needs of their colleagues, providing them with advice and arranging for further educational or training activities, as well as consulting the employer about how to carry out such activities. The URL system is described as successful, but is very much focused on the needs of the trade unions and their members. The employers come in at a later stage in the process and their involvement and support is often described by trade union representatives as insufficient.

In the Swedish example presented in detail in this report, a bottom-up approach for the validation of an individual's skills and knowledge was developed by the Validationcentre in Göteborg. Although supported by the government, the responsibility for creating a system for the acknowledging of competencies, skills and knowledge rested with the social partners and the educational system. Companies such as Volvo were active in supporting local actors such as the Validationcentre in Göteborg in their work with establishing methods and tools for validating knowledge and competencies. As a consequence, occupational groups within the company, such as production technicians, received "competence profiles", documented

outlines of what knowledge, skills and competencies are necessary to be a production technician in the car industry. Many of these occupations did not have such documentation previously.

The benefit of such a system of validation is that it is adjusted to meet the local conditions in which it is supposed to be implemented and used. The disadvantage however is that the skills and experiences may only be locally recognised and not acknowledged on the labour market in general.

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