

**Good practice  
in validation of learning outcomes**

Germany

**Recognition of learning outcomes for  
further studies**



*Good practise in validation of learning outcomes. Germany. Recognition of learning outcomes for further education*

Based on the expertise by dr hab. Ewa Bacia

Editors:

Aleksandra Wójcicka, Roksana Pierwieniecka, Barbara Przybylska

Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych

ul. Górczewska 8

01-180 Warszawa

tel. (22) 241 71 00; [www.ibe.edu.pl](http://www.ibe.edu.pl)

Citation template:

Educational Research Institute (2020). *Good practise in validation of learning outcomes. Germany. Recognition of learning outcomes for further education*. Warsaw: Educational Research Institute.

© Copyright by: Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych, Warsaw 2020

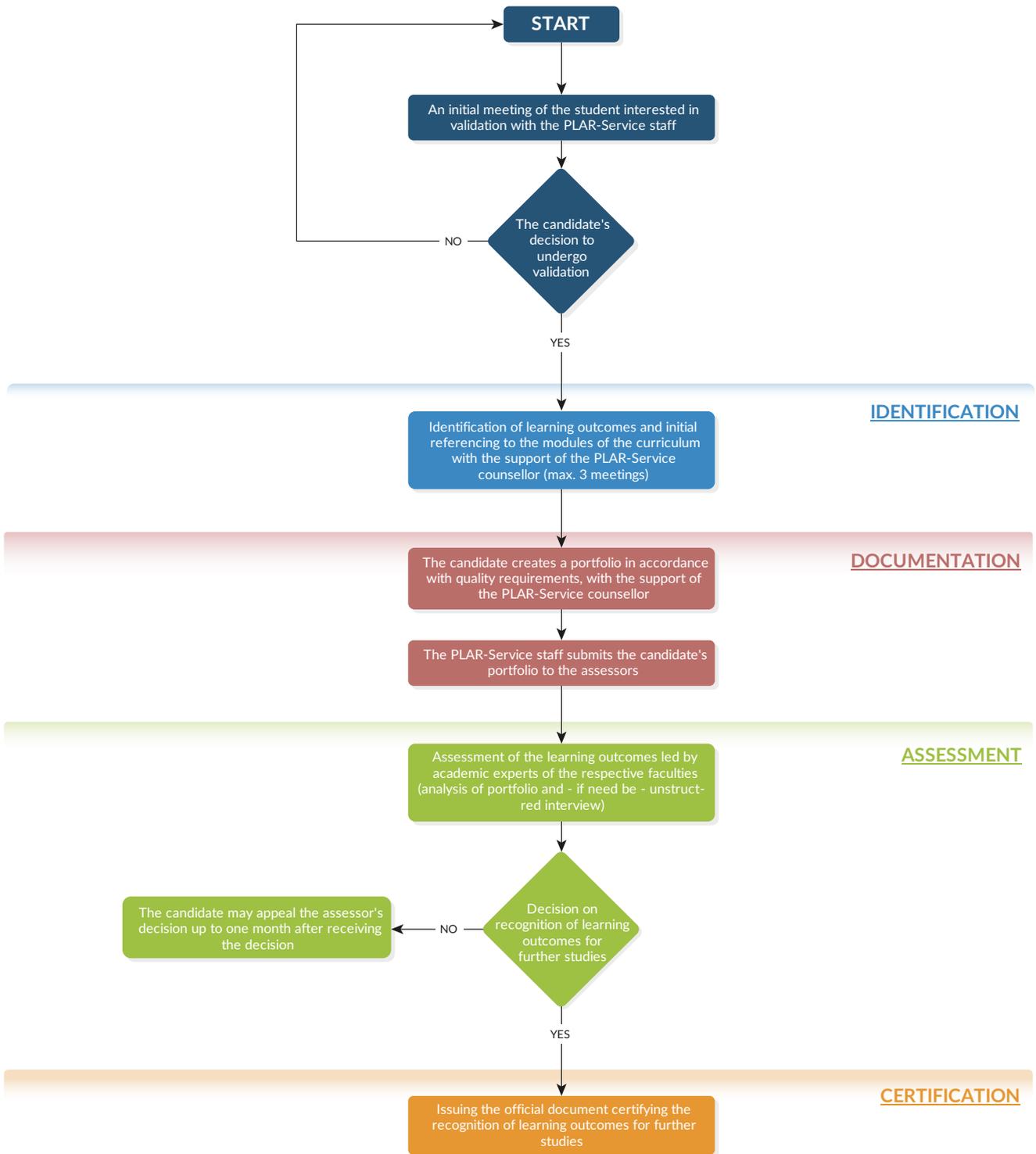
ISBN

This publication is co-financed by the European Social Fund of the European Union as part of the project entitled *Support to central government administration, awarding bodies and quality assurance institutions in implementing stage II of the Integrated Qualifications System*.

This copy is free of charge.

## Table of contents

1. Country, institution name. . . . .	5
2. Institution website. . . . .	5
3. Qualifications. . . . .	5
4. Short description of the validation process. . . . .	5
5. Detailed description of the validation process . . . . .	5
5.1. Initial Meeting with a Counsellor. . . . .	6
5.2. Identification. . . . .	6
5.3. Documentacion . . . . .	6
5.4. Assessment . . . . .	6
5.4.1. Corresponding to the level of the learning outcomes. . . . .	7
5.4.2. Corresponding to the level of the competences assigned to a given field of study. . . . .	7
5.5. Certification . . . . .	7
6. Validation methods. . . . .	7
7. Validation results . . . . .	9
8. Human resources . . . . .	10
8.1. PLAR – Service Employees. . . . .	10
8.2. Assessors . . . . .	11
9. Organizational and material conditions. . . . .	11
10. Quality assurance. . . . .	12
11. Financing. . . . .	12
12. Context of good practice . . . . .	13
13. Comments. . . . .	13
Comments. . . . .	15



## 1. Country, institution name

- Germany
- ■ Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg (University of Oldenburg)

## 2. Institution website

<http://www.uol.de>

## 3. Qualifications

This good practice is about the recognition of learning outcomes for further education.

EQF Level: not applicable

## 4. Short description of the validation process

In Germany, competences acquired outside the higher education system can be recognised towards a study programme. Since 2005, the University of Oldenburg has been conducting a validation process that enables individual modules to be completed as part of a licentiate or master's degree course. This validation is only available to University students. It cannot be used by applicants for studies or doctoral students.

The regulations in force enable the procedure to be conducted for all licentiate and master's degree courses (full list is available [here](#)). In practice, validation is most often performed for courses of study with a vocational profile, which are frequently chosen by people with previous work experience. This procedure allows the recognition of learning outcomes of **up to half of the number of ECTS credits allocated to a particular study programme**.

Since February 2017, those undertaking validation have been supported by the **PLAR-Service** (*Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Service*), an advisory team made up of representatives of various University units, specifically designed to support those interested in undertaking validation at the University. The tasks and competences of the people employed there are described in section 8 on staff resources. However, it is worth mentioning here that the team is made up of staff from the Academic Examinations Office, the Lifelong Learning Centre, the Competence Area Crediting and the Office of Studies and Teaching.

The process consists of the following stages:

- An **initial meeting** between the student interested in validation with the staff of Competence Area Crediting and the Academic Examinations Office;
- **Identification of learning outcomes** and their initial referencing to the modules in the curriculum with the support of a counsellor from PLAR-Service (maximum of three meetings);
- **Documentation of learning outcomes** of the person seeking recognition, with the counselling support of PLAR-Service;
- **Assessment of learning outcomes** by experts, i.e. teaching staff of the relevant faculty, familiar with the procedure of recognising learning outcomes for further studies;
- **Issuance of a document** with the outcome of the procedure, certifying the recognition of the learning outcomes, informing that they have not been recognised, or recommending an additional procedure to confirm the competences.

The result of a successful validation is a **shortened period of study**.

## 5. Detailed description of the validation process

Comment

## 5.1. Initial Meeting with a Counsellor

The validation process is initiated by a meeting between:

- the person interested in validation,
- a staff person from Competence Area Crediting,
- a staff person from the Academic Examinations Office.

The first meeting is crucial to the validation process. By involving staff from the two University units mentioned above, it is possible to clarify issues concerning the recognition of learning outcomes for studies (e.g. which learning outcomes can be applied to the modules that are part of the study programme) and the guidelines for preparing a portfolio. The next steps in the process are also determined during this meeting.

Two paths are possible. The first one is straightforward – the recognition of completed vocational training as a student apprenticeship. The second one is more complex and is used in situations where the candidate cannot confirm possessed learning outcomes from previously attained qualifications. In this case, a portfolio must be presented. The second procedure is the subject of this good practice.

## 5.2. Identification

A person who decides to undergo validation at the University of Oldenburg attends an individual counselling meeting where subsequent appointments to the PLAR-Service are set. Meeting dates can be scheduled about six to eight weeks in advance.

In a period of about six weeks, successive (a maximum of three) counselling meetings are held. During these meetings, the candidate's **learning outcomes are identified**. They are also pre-assigned to the study programme modules that they can count towards. **Preparing a portfolio** is also discussed during these meetings. The person participating in the process receives a portfolio template developed by the University, which must be supplemented with relevant evidence and artefacts confirming the possession of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education.

## 5.3. Documentacion

The procedure is based on documenting the learning outcomes acquired by a person during his/her individual learning pathway. The documents are collected in a portfolio, the structure of which is described in section 6. It is the responsibility of the validation candidate to **actively seek or develop evidence of specific learning outcomes**. This phase, therefore, requires a high level of commitment from the candidate. PLAR-Service supports persons involved in this process, but ultimately its success depends on the involvement of the candidates.

If the portfolio has been developed in accordance with the quality requirements of PLAR-Service (see section 11 on quality assurance for more details), it is sent to the assessors.

## 5.4. Assessment

The learning outcomes are assessed by analysing the portfolio prepared by the candidate. PLAR-Service staff send the documentation submitted by the candidate to the assessors who work at the University as lecturers in the relevant subject areas. On the basis of the document analysis, they prepare an expert opinion on whether the contents of the portfolio prove that the candidate has the competences required for the study programme.

When the candidate has not provided sufficient evidence in the portfolio, the experts may require an additional confirmation procedure: an interview on the ambiguities arising from the portfolio and the learning outcomes documented there. In this case, the outcome of the validation is decided on the basis of the portfolio and the interview.

The assessors may conclude that the content of the portfolio prepared by the candidate corresponds to the content of the study programme and is considered satisfactory at the level:

- of specific learning outcomes in a module,
- of the competences that should be acquired in a given field of study.

#### 5.4.1. Corresponding to the level of the learning outcomes

The comparison and confirmation of equivalency with the level of the learning outcomes is done in two stages, by comparing content and levels.

- **Comparing content** – this consists of checking whether the learning outcomes presented by the candidate correspond to at least 70% of the learning outcomes contained in the selected modules within the study programmes.
- **Comparing levels** – this checks whether the learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system correspond to or exceed the Licentiate or Master's level. a highly structured tool known as the Module Level Indicator (MLI) – described in more detail in the section on validation methods – is used to compare and benchmark levels.

#### 5.4.2. Corresponding to the level of the competences assigned to a given field of study

In this case, the comparison is made to the entire set of learning outcomes presented in the portfolio. This type of confirmation is only possible if the **study module explicitly relates to vocational competences**. They are often already recognisable in the module title, e.g. project management, personnel management, team communication, etc.

If the assessment result recognises the set of learning outcomes as equivalent to those of a module, in principle it is recognised without a grade. In specific cases, e.g. when learning outcomes have been achieved in a formal education system and assessed there in a manner comparable to a university assessment, it is possible to record the previously awarded grades.

If the outcome of the assessment is negative, the candidate can appeal the decision in writing within one month.

### 5.5. Certification

At the end of the learning outcomes assessment phase, the unit responsible for conducting examinations at the faculty (*Prüfungsausschuss*) issues a document certifying the recognition of learning outcomes for studies or informing the candidate that they have not been recognised (each decision contains a written justification). This document is officially issued to the candidate by the Academic Examinations Office.

## 6. Validation methods

Comment

The main method used at the University of Oldenburg is the portfolio analysis, which is sometimes supplemented with an interview. In theory, other validation methods such as additional tests are possible, but they are not used at the University of Oldenburg.

The portfolio should:

- present the competences of the person undergoing validation,
- credibly document them,
- include all the information needed for a decision on recognising the learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system.

A portfolio consists of the following elements:

### 1. A formal application for the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system

Subject-specific and blank application forms (for cross-curricular areas) are available from the [University's website](#). The application should indicate professional experience or directly refer to the content of the portfolio. If an individual applies for recognition of various modules, he/she can link one portfolio to several applications. In the application, the faculty representative acting as assessor records the decision of either recognising the learning outcomes or rejecting the application. A brief justification must be provided in each case of a rejection.

### 2. Certification of the completeness of the submitted portfolio

When the candidate decides that the portfolio is ready, PLAR-Service staff assess whether it is complete from their perspective (this is not a substantive assessment, but only a formal one). If it is complete, they confirm this with their signatures and send the documents to the assessors.

### 3. Justification for the application

The candidate should present the current state of his/her competences and indicate the main areas of activity and most important qualifications in regards to the modules they want to have confirmed. The application should not be longer than one A4-sized page.

### 4. Extended curriculum vitae

The extended curriculum vitae prepared by the candidate should include information on all training workshops, thematic seminars, courses, and information on non-professional activities such as community work, volunteering, etc.

### 5. Comparison of the learning outcomes acquired by the candidate outside the formal education system with the learning outcomes listed in the modules of the study programme

This is the essential part of the portfolio. This task is performed by candidates with the support of PLAR-Service staff. The compilation is in the form of a table in which the candidate substantiates his/her request to have the learning outcomes acquired outside the formal system recognised as part of the given study module.

The candidate preparing the comparison should first analyse the competence goals of the given module to know its exemplary graduate profile. On this basis, his/her competences and skills should be described and substantiated. When assessing the level of the competence, the [MLI tool](#) is used. This tool contains **51 criteria** defined along a nine-stage scale:

1. The breadth and currency of the knowledge,
2. Critical understanding,
3. Interdisciplinarity,
4. Problem solving,
5. Practical relevance,
6. Innovation and creativity,
7. Autonomy,
8. Communication,
9. Taking into account social and ethical issues.

The results obtained from the individual scales are totalled and on the basis of the aggregate result, a decision is made as to whether the achieved competence level corresponds to the level of higher education. The final MLI score is referenced to the EQF levels.

Figure 1. Comparison of the learning outcomes in a portfolio (developed by Ewa Bacia in PLARnet, 2018).

**Module:** ... [number of the module for which the candidate is requesting recognition]

<b>Module description:</b> ... <i>[exact description of the module with its code and title, which should be re-written from the module description.]</i>		
<b>Learning outcomes of the module</b> <i>[this is where the competence objectives are presented]</i>		
<b>Analogous competences and skills</b> <i>("I can...", "I am able to...")</i>	<b>Learning context</b> <i>(Where the given competences and skills were acquired)</i>	<b>Indicated evidence</b>
<i>[this is where competences are described to check whether they correspond to the given module's competence objectives – from 4 to 10 competences]</i>	<i>[this is where the learning contexts of the competences listed under "Analogous competences and skills" are described]</i>	<i>[this is where documents confirming the acquisition of the competences are indicated, e.g. work samples, certificates from employers, one's own publications, certificates and attestations]</i>

## 6. Evidence of acquired competences

The candidate should include **authentic evidence of acquired competences** in his/her portfolio. These may include, for example: examples of work results, press articles, reports, own publications, self-produced presentations, excerpts from CVs, exchange of correspondence, employer's certificates and others. The evidence presented should be accompanied, where needed, by information on the context in which it was produced. Of course, in order to comply with the provisions on the protection of personal data or professional secrecy, the candidate can present in writing how a person should act in a given situation as evidence of the competences and experience described.

## 7. Certificates and attestations

This part of the portfolio contains the described certificates and attestations acquired professionally and in the community.

An additional method that assessors can use is the unstructured interview. Supplementary validation methods are used when the candidate does not provide sufficient evidence in the portfolio. The interview is not an oral theoretical test, but rather a discussion about the contents of the portfolio to clarify any ambiguities about its content.

## 7. Validation results

Comment

The outcomes of the process of validating learning outcomes include the **recognition and confirmation of learning outcomes** for one or more curriculum modules, resulting in the shorter duration of studies. It is also possible to recognise the learning outcomes of part of a module. This result can only be achieved if the given part of the module is linked to a partial examination. This is due to the specificity of German

universities, where a module usually consists of two courses, each of which has its own form of passing, which is treated as a partial examination.

An additional outcome of the process is a **prepared portfolio**.

## 8. Human resources

Many University of Oldenburg staff persons are involved in validation. Above all, it is important to distinguish:

- **PLAR-Service staff** responsible for providing validation counselling, support to assessors and students undertaking validation, communication among the staff involved, and the coordination of validation,
- the **assessors** performing assessment.

When activities to have learning outcomes recognised towards further studies were begun, a number of information meetings were organised for teaching and administrative staff. The meetings were also held later. All this was done in order to increase the competences of the staff conducting validation and to systematise their knowledge of the procedure. In addition, special brochures on the course and methodology of the validation process were published for those making decisions on the outcome of validation in individual faculties.

### 8.1. PLAR – Service Employees

The PLAR-Service was established in 2017 due to the unsatisfactory results of initiating procedures to recognise learning outcomes towards further studies. From 2010 to 2015, only 50 persons took advantage of this process. It was therefore decided to set up a support structure within the University. In 2015, a working group started developing procedures to facilitate the validation process. One result of this work was also the establishment of the PLAR-Service team.

The team was set up to provide professional support and counselling not only to the students undergoing validation, but also to experts assessing the documentation prepared by the students. PLAR-Service brings together different University units. It is therefore a team set up to perform specific tasks as well as a network to ensure the transparency of the process, the flow of information and the involvement of the resources needed to achieve the objectives.

Validation is performed by staff from different University units. The PLAR-Service consists of:

- **Academic Examinations Office** (*Akademisches Prüfungsamt*) staff, who organise on-call hours for students interested in validation and who specialise in the recognition of higher education achievements and competences acquired in working life;
- **Lifelong Learning Centre** (*Center für lebenslanges Lernen – C3L*) staff, responsible for coordinating the PLARnet project and maintaining the network in the units of the University of Oldenburg. To this end, meetings with study coordinators and faculty assessors are organised. C3L employees also organise and provide information meetings for students;
- **Competence Area Crediting** (*Kompetenzbereich Anrechnung*), where the main task of its staff under PLAR is to advise and support students in developing their portfolios. As of 2020, the Studies and Teaching Office will take over counselling tasks as the result of modifications introduced after monitoring the validation process. The change is intended to increase the chances of ensuring the continuity of the counselling process. In addition, Competence Area Crediting organises information meetings and publishes PLAR-Service brochures
- **The Office of Studies and Teaching** (*Referat Studium und Lehre*) represents the PLAR-Service project at the presidium level of the University (the equivalent of Poland's university rectorate).

The staff of these units also act as advisors and coordinators of the validation process. It is worth noting that at the launch of the PLAR-Service, one additional position was created at the University of Oldenburg, divided among the three University units, specifically for the tasks relating to the process of recognising learning

outcomes for further studies. An additional part-time position was assigned to the Office of Studies and Teaching, while the Competence Area Crediting and the Academic Examinations Office each received a ¼ time position.

The main task of the counsellors is to **support the portfolio development process**. They must be familiar with the guidelines of portfolio development and have the competence to assess the learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system in terms of their equivalency to relevant study modules.

The tasks of the advisers cannot be assumed by any University administration employee, as they require special competences and preparation, including, above all:

- pedagogical competence and well-developed communication skills,
- knowledge of formal, non-formal and informal learning as well as an understanding of their specific characteristics.

PLAR-Service staff are also responsible for organising validation. They oversee the process, the flow of information between the University units involved and the students undergoing validation. The process is coordinated by a closely co-operating Academic Examinations Office staff person and a validation counsellor. They are required to have:

- very good knowledge of the internal structures of the University,
- knowledge of the validation procedures in force,
- well-developed communication skills.

## 8.2. Assessors

The function of assessors is performed by the teaching staff of individual faculties. They must be familiar with the principles of comparing and assessing learning outcomes achieved outside higher education with the competences of the study programme.

Assessors are **subject-matter experts** with the knowledge required to evaluate the content of the portfolio and compare the evidence gathered there to confirm equivalency between the possessed learning outcomes of a validation candidate and those of a given module. The assessors are selected by the entities responsible for organising and conducting examinations within the faculty (*Prüfungsausschüsse der Fakultäten*). The competences of the assessors are determined by the faculty. In theory, every teaching staff member can act as a validation assessor.

## 9. Organizational and material conditions

In order to support people undertaking validation, PLAR-Service has a permanent advisory structure, including both regular on-call duty at their University office and individually set appointments for counselling meetings. Because their clients are students and professionally active, appointments are also offered in the evening. Counselling meetings are held in PLAR-Service's own office space. Counselling can also occur by telephone and e-mail.

General information on validation and PLAR-Service is available on the University's website. Students can obtain more detailed information through the University's student intranet portal. Students can also make an appointment online for an initial counselling meeting at the Academic Examinations Office.

It generally takes about six weeks to hold the counselling meetings at PLAR-Service for supporting the identification and documentation of learning outcomes. Applications for the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system towards a study module submitted to the Academic Examinations Office are processed as a rule within ten weeks. The candidate receives a document from the Examination Office certifying the validation result within the following two weeks.

## 10. Quality assurance

Standards of conduct, including those for quality assurance, were developed following the validation procedures introduced in Athabasca University in Canada. They have been treated as models. In 2015, the **quality assurance criteria for validation** at the University of Oldenburg were established, and include:

- **Length of the process** – applications are processed in the shortest possible time and the candidate receives an acknowledgement of receipt;
- **Transparency of the procedure** – for the purpose of implementing validation, a number of regulations for guidelines and descriptions of activities have been developed, which are available to students in electronic form. Students can obtain information on the **documents** to be submitted with the application, the **persons** making the decision on the outcome of the process, the **time** within which a candidate can expect a decision, and the **criteria** used in making the decision;
- **Counsellors and contact persons** – the University employs counsellors to inform learners about the opportunities and requirements for validation and to support candidates in collecting documents in the validation process where necessary;
- **Formal embedding of validation** – validation is a formal part of the examination arrangements and learners are entitled to use the process;
- **The obligation to state the reasons for the decision on the outcome of the validation** – a decision on the outcome of validation contains a statement of reasons, both for a positive and a negative decision. The justification is in written form, concise and in accessible language;
- **Ability to appeal the decision** – the candidate has the right to appeal if the application for recognition of learning outcomes is rejected; the University is required to consider the appeal;
- **Taking validation into account in the design of the study programme** – validation leads to an actual reduction in the total duration of study, not to forced breaks during the period of study;
- **Documentation of the process** – processes are systematically documented in compliance with data protection laws;
- **Monitoring the trajectories of students** – the academic trajectory of those students who have undertaken validation is systematically monitored and the results are analysed;
- **Completeness in the recognition of learning outcomes** – ensuring that all learning outcomes, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, are taken into account;
- **Avoiding problems in the future** – it is ensured that using validation will not cause any problems for learners in terms of further study and, where problems may be unavoidable, support is offered to students to help resolve them;
- **Validity of the validation decision** – a positive validation outcome means that the learner actually has all the knowledge, skills and social competences that he/she has submitted for recognition.

The data obtained in the validation process and its elements are subject to systematic **monitoring and internal evaluation**. Based on the results of the analysis, the validation process and related procedures are systematically developed. The first evaluation report is scheduled to be issued in 2020.

In 2018, the process of recognising learning outcomes for further studies at the University of Oldenburg was **externally evaluated**. The evaluator was the Central Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of the State of Lower Saxony (*Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur des Landes Niedersachsen*). The evaluation analysed the materials documenting the validation process and interviewed students and teaching staff. **The results of the evaluation were the basis for the decision to place PLAR-Service permanently within the University of Oldenburg.**

A specific element to ensure the quality of validation was the establishment of an internal network, covering all units of the University, so that the different stages of validation take place in a uniformly coordinated process.

## 11. Financing

Comment

There are no costs for persons undertaking validation at the University of Oldenburg. The University assumes the costs of performing validation using project funds.

## 12. Context of good practice

Since 2005, Competence Area Crediting at the University of Oldenburg has been developing, implementing and improving pathways and instruments to facilitate lifelong learning, both in formal and non-formal education and informal learning. The tasks of the unit are:

- to support students in the process of confirming vocational competences by recognising learning outcomes acquired outside formal education as part of their studies;
- to develop methods for individual documentation of competences (e.g. portfolio), useful both for recognising vocational competences and establishing the fulfilment of conditions for admission to higher education, e.g. for refugees;
- to initiate cooperation between institutions in the field of higher and vocational education and training, in particular with a view to developing joint learning opportunities;
- to support organisations providing adult education in adapting their curricula to higher education recognition.

Activities in these areas was made possible by two pioneering programmes:

- **the initiative of the German Ministry of Education and Research entitled "Transfer of vocational competences in higher education"** (*ANKOM – Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen auf Hochschulstudiengänge*); project website: <https://ankom.dzhw.eu/>,
- **the model project "The open higher education institution of Lower Saxony"** (*Offene Hochschule Niedersachsen*); project website: <https://www.offene-hochschule-niedersachsen.de/ohn/>, supported by the Ministry of Science and Culture.

The validation process developed and implemented by the University of Oldenburg is conducted within the **PLARnet project**, which is part of the "Opening Up Higher Education Institutions" programme (*Öffnung der Hochschulen*), financed by the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony and the European Social Fund. The PLARnet project has been operating since 2016.

## 13. Comments

A limitation to the introduction in other universities of a procedure for recognising learning outcomes for studies, similar to that of the University of Oldenburg, is the high level of commitment required – the resources of the University, the time and work of the staff involved and those interested in undertaking validation.

At the University of Oldenburg, a number of units and their staffs are involved in the validation process and act as advisors and assessors. The mobilisation of a unit's own human and financial resources or the acquisition of alternative resources and funding is necessary to launch a similar process in other universities. It is also extremely important that administrative staff, experts-teachers and counsellors with pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of competence diagnosis work closely together. Cooperation is also needed at the administrative level – from the central level to the level of individual faculties, where applications for the recognition of learning outcomes are assessed. Therefore, scope of tasks assigned to specific units must be precisely defined.

The recognition of learning outcomes for studies as introduced in Oldenburg also places high demands on counsellors. On the one hand, they promote the concept among students of documenting their competences with collected authentic evidence and, on the other hand, they defend this concept among University teaching staff, who are not always favourable inclined to accept it.

The process, in turn, requires students interested in undergoing validation to be able to reflect on, describe, prove and compare their competences acquired outside the University with the learning outcomes assigned to the modules in the curriculum. This is particularly true for social skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts. The procedure is much less effective when the learner presents only formal education qualifications.

## Comments

---

### corresponds to the content of the study programme

---

#### corresponds to the content of the study programme

These activities are described as „determining equivalency“ at the University of Oldenburg.

### Module Level Indicator (MLI) tool

---

#### MLI tool

A short version of the MLI tool in German is available from the University of Oldenburg (Muskens & Kaiser 2017, <https://uol.de/anrechnungsprojekte/downloads>).

### part of the module

---

#### part of the module

This result can only be achieved if the given part of the module is linked to a partial examination. This is due to the specificity of German universities, where a module usually consists of two courses, each having its own form of passing, which is treated as a partial examination. The learning outcomes can only be recognised towards part of a module if that part of the module can be partially passed.

### The University assumes the costs of performing validation

---

#### The University assumes the costs of performing validation

The University of Oldenburg has followed the model of Athabasca University in Canada when developing PLAR solutions. Unlike the Canadian solution, there are no fees for participating in validation.