MAKING ADULT SKILLS VISIBLE: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

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Abstract

Many current European Union priorities focus on lifelong learning, making skills visible as well as supporting mobility of workforces within Europe including the integration of migrants and refugees [1] [2]. Supportive, transnational processes for the recognition and validation of learning provide an opportunity to maximise human capital and to benefit labour markets and societies generally leading to improved economic performance. However, many authors have pointed to the difficulties in terms of the limited use of recognition or validation of prior learning in Europe as well as the lack of consistency and coherence in approaches [3].

Visible Skills of Adults (VISKA) is an Erasmus+ Key Action 3 Project, filed under the call priority theme of "Employment and Skills: validation of informal and non-formal learning in Education and Training." The project partners, from Norway, Iceland, Belgium and Ireland will address European policy priorities by cooperating to make existing knowledge, skills and competences of adults more visible through consideration of the practice of validation of informal and non-formal learning and the implementation of some planned field trials. An initial mapping process has provided a baseline set of data on the existing processes, procedural information and resources related to the validation of learning of migrants, refugees and those with low qualifications within partner jurisdictions prior to implementation of the various interventions planned by the project team [4]. This initial information provides a context for the action-based interventions and a framework for the evaluation of the outcomes.

This paper details the five planned interventions drawn up by the project partners and the positions them in relation to the data collection processes and the potential for the project to contribute to policy at a local, national and European level. It addresses how well these interventions map to the European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning [5] and inform the national responses to these guidelines, and previews the project outputs and outcomes.

Keywords: Mobility, learning, validation, recognition, skills, informal, non-formal, life-long, Erasmus +

1 INTRODUCTION

The VISKA project seeks to address the European policy priority of diminishing skills mismatch by making knowledge, skills and competences of adults more visible through validation of informal and non-formal learning in four countries. In particular, the VISKA project addresses the need to make the skills of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees more visible, in order to shorten their time to employment, targeted education and training, and active integration and engagement in society. Along with unemployed and low-skilled or low-qualified adults in general, these target groups are currently at a disadvantage in European societies and could greatly benefit from improved access to validation services and from more holistic and accessible validation arrangements.

The VISKA project will implement and evaluate five interventions, agreed by the partners and applied to the current processes (in the respective national contexts) for the validation of prior learning. The interventions have been developed and agreed with a view to making the knowledge, skills and competence of migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and adults with low skills levels, more visible. While there are differences across the four participating countries in relation to current realities, validation policies, practices and infrastructures, the focus of the project team is to learn how the chosen interventions, when enacted, can bring about real change for individuals and systems, and to collate the learning to contribute to a broader policy agenda at national and European level.

2 VALIDATION IN EUROPE

In 2004 the Council of the European Union developed principles on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. These principles, as outlined below, provided the basis for future discourse surrounding validation and, more specifically, the validation of informal and non-formal learning.

The principles are as follows [6], [7].

- Validation must be voluntary.
- The privacy of individuals should be respected.
- Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed.
- Stakeholders should establish systems for validation.
- Systems should contain mechanism for guidance and counselling of individuals.
- Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.
- The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
- Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation.
- The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
- The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

By 2009, in the CEDEFOP publication 'European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning' [8] the 2004 principles had been further distilled into four elements with focus on the individual, stakeholder, confidence and trust, and finally, credibility and legitimacy. These principles informed the development of, and considerations surrounding the validation of, prior learning in Europe as means to improve lifelong and life-wide learning [7] [8]. In 2012 the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning identified four stages of the validation process as follows [9];

- IDENTIFICATION through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual;
- DOCUMENTATION to make visible the individual's experiences;
- A formal ASSESSMENT of these experiences; and
- CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification;

The Council recommendation of 2012 stresses that efforts should be made to enable access to education based on the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning and not just with respect to formal learning. In addition, the role of employer, youth and civil society organisations in promoting the identification and documentation of learning acquired using tools such as Europass were also mentioned as potential promoters of the process [9]. The 2012 recommendation and indeed the wider literature identified those who are socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-skilled as potential beneficiaries. In addition to this cohort, in the context of the VISKA project, migrants and refugees are emerging as a group that can benefit from the process, more notably in the Nordic and central European countries [10].

Europe 2020 is the ten-year growth strategy for Europe while Education and Training 2020 is the current framework for co-operation in Education and Training. This framework has four priority areas, each of which directly relates to the validation or the recognition of prior learning [1];

- Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training
- Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

While many policy documents point to the benefits of mutual and cross-border recognition processes valuing formal, non-formal and informal learning and the clear benefits for individuals and society the reality is that despite some isolated areas of good practice difficulties remain. A recent UNESCO policy paper [11] points to some technology-supported exemplars as well as providing useful recommendations for consideration.

3   VISKA PROJECT INTERVENTIONS

The VISKA project proposal details five interventions which are to be implemented by the partners in the field trial settings. The interventions, as follows, were agreed by the implementation partners at the project proposal stages.

Intervention 1: Developing and extending regional/national networks and partnerships to include policy makers, social partners and practitioners working on the validation of NFIL

Intervention 2: Extending / adapting tools used in the validation of NFIL – includes digitisation as well as customisation for use with specific beneficiary groups and enhanced quality assurance of validation processes

Intervention 3: Creating a common set of criteria for the documentation and assessment of transversal skills, able to be used with one or more adult learner groups

Intervention 4: Training and / or Capacity building for guidance counsellors and other frontline staff working on the validation of NFIL, including with specific adult beneficiary groups

Intervention 5: Improving access to and awareness of validation services and support among specific adult beneficiary groups

Taken together it can be deduced that these interventions impact directly on many aspects of validation. Intervention 1, the development and extension of networks contributes to the context within the country or region and is intended to bring together actors from different organisations to act as local advisory and subject matter experts to inform both policy and practice. Each Country has established a National Advisory Group for the project and these groups act as both direction setters and sounding boards for the project activity. Intervention 4, which focuses on training or capacity building for front line staff or guidance counsellors who interact directly with potential learners, will contribute to a discourse on what training might be needed and should contribute to the conversation on any specific challenges that might arise from the groups under consideration in this project in each of the trial sites. These challenges can further contribute to policy where appropriate.

Interventions 2 and 5 are the ones that are likely to impact directly with the potential beneficiaries. Improving access to and awareness of services is an aim that is approached with a certain degree of caution to ensure that expectations are not raised that cannot be met. The adaptation and trial of digital tools provides an opportunity to explore a means of facilitating the identification and evidencing of skills and competences at an individual level and may contribute to the scalability of practice. Intervention 3 provides the opportunity to have a broad discourse leading ideally to a common understanding of Transversal Skills and an exploration of how a recognition of these skills might benefit the learner either within a learning context or in the workplace domain.   Figure 1 below is a visualisation of the interfaces where these interventions may have the most significant impact.
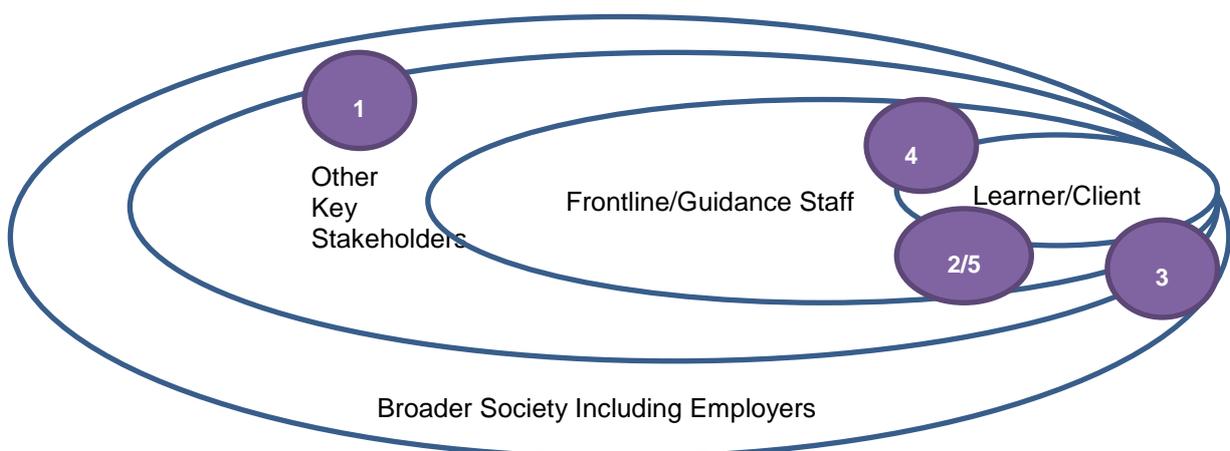

Figure 1. Relationships of the Planned Interventions.

4   DATA COLLECTION

The VISKA project proposal envisages several points in the project activities at which information will need to be collected by the implementation partners. The project takes an 'action' focus and each of the country implementation partners will be involved in specific field trials (chosen by them and applied by them in their country context) in relation to the validation of prior learning focused on different target groups.   This means that there is a challenge to be overcome as the activities and hence the collecting and recording of information will not be uniform across the project.

In terms of collecting information there are three (or more) potential target groups to be considered in the research:

- •   The learners who might seek to access validation services
- •   The guidance and other front-line staff who interact directly with the learners
- •   The policy makers (and partner organisation staff) and other influencers as well as the National Advisory groups chosen with the perspective of their role in the country/region.

The data is being collected to enable an evaluation of the impact of the 'actions' or interventions undertaken by each partner and to ensure that the overall project impact, outputs and outcomes can be collectively evaluated from a policy impact perspective.

Data collection workshops and advisory handbook are implemented within the project consortium to ensure, insofar as is possible, alignment between the data collected and the data collection methodology.
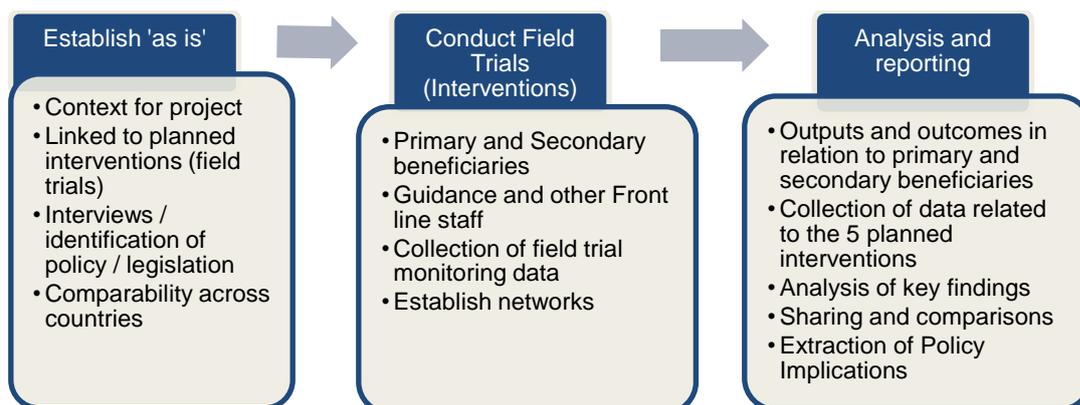

Figure 2. Overall project structure.

4.1   Contextualising the data

Working collaboratively the project partners have sought to identify the relationship between the planned interventions and the European guidelines for implementing and developing validation [6] and to consider the potential policy impacts that may result from the project. A further exercise to identify the relevant stakeholders for each of the interventions and the potential findings that will emerge from the analysis of the data has prepared the way for the actions in each of the countries. An outline of the mapped relationship between the VISKA project planned interventions and the conditions for developing and implementation validation is evident from Table1.

Table 1. Link between VISKA Interventions and EU Guidelines

Project Intervention	EU Guidelines – Conditions for Developing and Implementing Validation
Intervention 1: Networks **Links to: A, B, C, D**	A: Information, guidance and counselling
Intervention 2: Tools **Links to: D, E, F**	B: Stakeholder coordination
Intervention 3: Transversal Skills **Links to: C, D**	C: Links to national qualifications systems and frameworks
Intervention 4: Training for Staff **Links to: A, F**	D: Standards and learning outcomes
Intervention 5: Improving access **Links to: A, B, C**	E: Quality assurance
	F: Professional competence of practitioners

In this analysis it becomes clear that the interventions to be undertaken can be related to aspects of the identified conditions and therefore the resulting policy proposals can be interpreted in terms of existing literature.

5   CONCLUSIONS

Each of the national project teams is in the process of completing their field trials through some or all of the planned interventions with their chosen cohort of research participants through the agreed experimental protocol. Even at these early stages in the project it is clear that the country partners are at different starting positions and that they face different challenges and opportunities. Following those field trials the task for the project team will be to evaluate the activities and interactions and to seek to draw generalizable conclusions in relation to policy at a regional, local and national level.

It is intended that the actions under each of the intervention and the subsequent results will inform future policy, procedural and strategic development in the partner countries to ensure sufficient, robust and responsive validation systems for migrants, refugees and the low skilled.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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