

# **A mapping and analysis of the validation arrangements for migrants, refugees and the low-qualified**

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## **Abstract**

A number of European Union priorities focus on sustained and shared approaches to making skills visible as well as supporting mobility of workforces within Europe including the integration of migrants and refugees. 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.

Currently validation arrangements within Europe are variable and fragmented with few common approaches from the perspective of the employers, further and higher education providers, and policy makers. As the research and evaluation partners in the VISKA (Visible Skills of Adults) project, funded under the European Commission Policy Experimentation initiative, the authors have undertaken an investigation of the validation landscape within the project partner countries.

This initial mapping process is intended to provide 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 various interventions agreed and planned by the project team. This vital contextual information provides a background for the action-based interventions and a framework for the evaluation of the outcomes. Evaluation of the outcomes of the implementation measures will contribute to policy development.

Europe will benefit from a sustained approach to the sharing of practices on validation directed towards third-country nationals. This paper provides an overview of the exploration of the legislative and practical frameworks reported by the country partners prior to the project implementation stages and is an important stepping stone towards impactful policy development.

Note: The VISKA project led by Skills Norway is a European Erasmus+ Key Action 3 Initiative,

## **Introduction to the VISKA project**

The 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 will 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 offers 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 validation arrangements.

The VISKA project will implement and evaluate 5 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<sup>1</sup> levels, more visible. While there are differences across the four participating countries in relation to 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. In order to be able to clearly identify and evaluate changes resulting from the interventions, it is necessary to explore the current situation in each partner country before the planned interventions supported by the project take place. This exploration when completed and analysed will provide an overview of the landscape within which the interventions will be enacted. This paper will provide a snapshot of the background to the project and an overview of validation in Europe as a context to the exploration of the situation with regard to validation in each of the partner countries.

### **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;

- 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.

(Council of European Union, 2004) (Cedefop, 2008)

By 2009 in the Cedefop publication 'European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning' (Cedefop, 2009) the 2004 principles had been further distilled into four elements with particular focus on the individual, stakeholder, confidence and trust, and finally credibility and legitimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the project proposal reference is made to low-skilled adults. The project team and indeed the nature of the project clearly recognises that this target group is likely to have many valuable skills and that it would be more appropriate to consider this group as those having low, or no, formal qualifications. This recognition is at the core of the project

- **Individual entitlements** - Identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning should, in principle, be a voluntary matter for the individual. There should be equal access and equal and fair treatment for all individuals. The privacy and rights of the individual are to be respected.
- **Stakeholder obligations** - Stakeholders, should establish, in accordance with their rights, responsibilities and competences, systems and approaches for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning. These should include appropriate quality assurance mechanisms. Stakeholders should provide guidance, counselling and information about these systems and approaches to individuals.
- **Confidence and trust** - The processes, procedures and criteria for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms.
- **Credibility and legitimacy** - Systems and approaches for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning should respect the legitimate interests and ensure the balanced participation of the relevant stakeholders.

(Cedefop, 2009)

These principles informed the development of, and considerations surrounding the validation of, prior learning in Europe which is seen as a way to improve lifelong and life-wide learning. (Cedefop, 2008) (Cedefop, 2009). It was already acknowledged by the Council of the EU in 2004 that the interpretation of 'validation' was not common across all countries. Whereas in some countries validation was used to denote early stages in the process at which the prior learning is identified, in others it referred to the assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. (Council of European Union, 2004) In 2012 the Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning identified four stages of the validation process as follows;

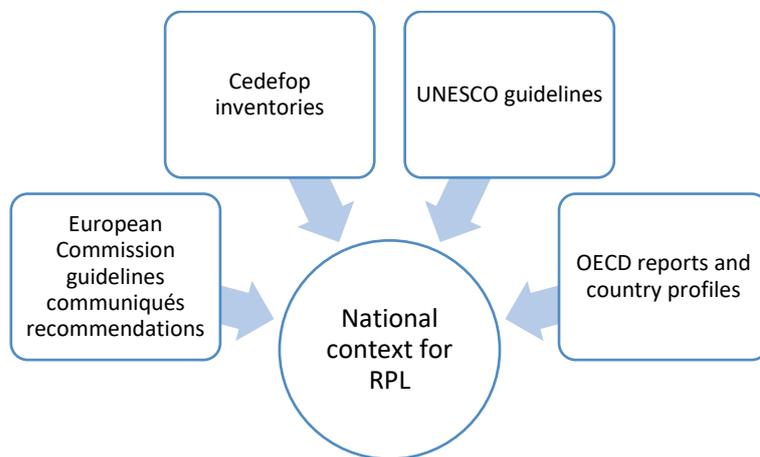
*Validation means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:*

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

(Council of the European Union, 2012)

The Council recommendation of 2012 stressed that efforts should be made to enable access to education on the basis of the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal 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 (Council of the European Union, 2012). 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, migrants are emerging as a group that can benefit from the process, more notably in the Nordic and central European countries (Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015).

In the 2016 synthesis update report on the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning the priorities of national approaches to validation were discussed (Cedefop; European Commission; ICF, 2017). A number of organisations at the European and international level are involved in considerations in the area of VPL and in developing guidelines, communiqués and recommendations to inform local and national contexts.



**Figure 1:** International policy framework for VPL informing the national context

The European Commission and the Council of the European Union have provided a macro influence in directing policies and legislation which have supported the restructuring and updating of learning systems (Bologna, 1999; European Commission, 2004, 2006; Bologna, 2005, 2007). The establishment of the two European frameworks; the *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF-LLL) and the *Bologna Framework for the European Higher Education Area* (EHEA), along with the Bologna process, provided the mechanisms whereby learning attained in a variety of contexts can be formally validated (Bologna, 1999; Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission 2010; 2015a, 2015b).

*Europe 2020* and *Education and Training 2020* are the key current policy initiatives driving national policy developments. *Europe 2020* is the ten year growth strategy for *Europe and Education and Training 2020* is the current framework for co-operation in Education and Training (Council of the European Union, 2009). This framework has four priority areas, each of which directly relates to validation or the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and its operation;

1. Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training. (Council of the European Union, 2009).

*Education and Training 2020*, was enacted in 2009, however, in the years prior to and following this, a significant number of reports and communiqués were delivered to enable an environment where mobility and transparency could be realised in the context of lifelong learning. These are summarised in Table 1:

**Table 1:** Timeline of relevant reports and communiqués

<b>International / European</b>	<b>YEAR</b>
<i>Towards a Learning Society - White Paper</i>	1995
<i>LLL a monitoring framework and trends in participation (OECD)</i>	1998
<i>Bologna EHEA joint declaration</i>	1999
<i>EU Inventory A memorandum of LLL (EC)</i>	2000
<i>EHEA Prague Communiqué Making a European area of LLL a reality (EC)</i>	2001
<i>Copenhagen Declaration</i>	2002
<i>European principles for RPL (EC) The role of national qualification systems in promoting LLL (OECD)</i>	2004
<i>Bergen Communiqué</i>	2005
<i>Helsinki Communiqué OECD Thematic review on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: Country Background report Norway</i>	2006
<i>London Communiqué Cedefop RNFIL for VET teachers &amp; trainers</i>	2007
<i>The EQF for LLL (EC )</i>	2008
<i>European Guidelines for VNFIL ET2020</i>	2009
<i>Country Practices Report (OECD) Guidelines for RNFIL (OECD) Recommendation on the promotion and VNFIL (EC) Final European Journal of Vocational Training (Cedefop)</i>	2010
<i>Guidelines on the RVA of outcomes of NFIL (UNESCO) EU Council Recommendation on VNFIL European Inventory Country reports (Cedefop)</i>	2012
<i>European Inventory Country reports (Cedefop) Education and Training monitor (EC)</i>	2014
<i>European Guidelines for VNFIL (Cedefop) RVA of the outcomes of NFIL in UNESCO member states (UNESCO) Cedefop provide European Database on VNFIL</i>	2015
<i>Cedefop thematic reports (2016 Inventory):</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Validation and open educational resources (OER)</i></li> <li>2. <i>Funding validation</i></li> <li>3. <i>Validation in the care and youth work sectors</i></li> <li>4. <i>Monitoring the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning</i></li> </ol>	2016

In addition to the contribution of the European Commission, Cedefop has provided valuable information on the recognition of prior learning, and has acted to promote and monitor practice across Europe. In 2007, Cedefop published, *'Recognition and Validation of non-formal and informal learning for VET teachers and trainers in the EU Member States'* to support the validation of the skills and learning of professionals involved in adult education provision (Cedefop, 2007). Cedefop published the *'European Journal of vocational training'* in 2010 and reported on the complexity of issues and the underlying tensions which can arise in skills recognition (Cedefop, 2010). In the same year, the European Inventory of Validation on Non Formal and Informal Learning which provided a

snapshot of how recognition was being used to overcome social exclusion and support access to employment opportunities (Hawley *et al.*, 2010).

In 2014, Cedefop published a comprehensive European inventory on validation (update), documenting 33 European countries, eight thematic reports and two case studies. This inventory focused on the challenges and highlighted access, awareness and social recognition. The issues of fragmentation, financial sustainability, coherence and professionalization of staff along with data collection were also noted (European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International; 2014). Significantly, on fragmentation it was found that relatively few countries had comprehensive national systems in place and that recognition of prior learning commonly operated as a special initiative or project at a local level. Coherence was seen as a challenge (European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International; 2014).

In 2015, a European database on Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning (VPL) or RPL, for both further and higher education was developed. This database is searchable by country and provides a comprehensive reference point on the operation of RPL in Europe (Cedefop, 2015a). The European database serves to support good practice in RPL by linking the European guidelines for validation with the inventory on practice and provides practical information for individuals and organisations involved in implementing and operating validation arrangements.

In 2015 Cedefop also updated the original '*European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*' when they published the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cedefop, 2009, 2015b). These guidelines provide information for individuals and institutions responsible for the delivery of validation arrangements (Cedefop, 2015b). Most recently Cedefop (2016b,c,d,e), published four reports on RPL practice; monitoring RPL, RPL in the care and youth work sectors, funding and open-education resources and validation. These reports underline the significance of RPL activity in Europe at the present time and show the diverse ways in which RPL is being used and implemented.

Beyond the European dimension, at an international level, UNESCO has also published material on RPL. In 2012 UNESCO published the UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning (UNESCO, 2012). This report outlined the vision, principles and purposes of RPL and key areas of action at national level:

1. RPL must be a key component within lifelong learning strategy
2. The RPL system must be readily accessible
3. Ensuring RPL is integral to education and training systems
4. Delivering RPL through a co-ordinated national approach that involves all
5. Supporting the capacity of personnel within RPL
6. Sustainable funding mechanisms for RPL

(UNESCO, 2012)

In 2015 UNESCO noted the emerging opportunities arising from the translation of non-formal and informal learning within both further and higher education (Yang, 2015). The publication details a range of legislation and public policies which endorsed the recognition of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning around the world for both further and higher education. The OECD also focused on RPL when it published '*Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning, Outcomes, Policies and Practices* in 2010 (Werquin, 2010). The OECD provided policy recommendations based on a review of 22 countries and advised on approaches for recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Finally, one of the most significant policy enactments in recent years is the *Council of the European Union Recommendation of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* which calls for all European countries to have arrangements for RPL in place by 2018. This recommendation has resulted in an increased impetus across the education and training sector to implement arrangements for RPL in a visible and meaningful way (Council of the European Union, 2012).

### **Exploration of validation ‘as-is’ in the partner countries**

In order to accurately and effectively plan for the implementation and analysis stage an ‘as-is’ exploration of validation in practice in the partner countries is required. An experimentation protocol document was developed to identify areas for exploration and to support as far as possible common questions and formats for the collection and collation of data. The purpose of conducting an ‘as-is’ overview is to identify the factors at a local, regional, national and European level that support, encourage but also hinder and curtail validation for migrants and refugees and the low qualified within the partner countries.

The experimentation protocol document forms an essential part of the mapping process which will establish existing practices and also guide an analysis of the individual country needs. The responses from each of the country partners will, when collated and analysed by the research and evaluation partners, provide a vital baseline on existing processes, procedures and resources for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and a structure through which to explore the lived experiences of key stakeholders. This important contextual information will support later evaluation of the interventions and their impacts. The content of the document has been guided by the research and evaluation partner but has also been contributed to collectively by the project partnership during the initial project meeting and through subsequent communication.

This protocol provides a structure for the first wave of the desk and empirical research phases of the VISKA project in each partner country. The document is a guideline for self-exploration providing a number of sections each relating to key parts of the situational analysis activity;

- Section 1: Environment Analysis
- Section 2: Stakeholders
  - Target group profile
  - Policy makers
  - Support personnel
- Section 3: Intervention pre field trial SWOT analysis

Looking at each section individually, Section 1 is the ‘environment analysis’ which seeks to identify the principles underpinning validation in the partner countries. Included in this part are elements such as social inclusion and access to education and the workforce. In addition to identifying the principles, the situational analysis also seeks to determine how and where the principle is supported, through national, regional or local legislation or policy. Statements supporting validation are sometimes but not always included in legislation or policies and can occur more frequently in strategy documents and in local languages so the project team within the particular partner country are best placed to complete this analysis.

Section 2 explores the key actors in relation to validation including those who are or may in the future seek validation within the particular partner country. In order to build and develop an effective validation system it is necessary to identify to some extent who the migrants and refugees in a particular country are, as well as identifying the relevant policy makers who develop systems

and policies to affect validation and any supporting actors or organisations at the local, regional and national levels.

The purpose of determining the key influencer or supporter of validation is useful for future development and planning. This could provide an indicator of the priority groups for validation in a country. The infrastructure of validation arrangements for migrants and refugees are of interest at a local, regional and national levels as well as the associated quality assurance arrangements and structures.

In order to plan effectively for validation for migrants and refugees their rights, status, opportunities and key focus at the local, regional and national levels are important to establish from the outset. The activities, services and supports and any linked organisations or structures are also important to know before effective planning for interventions and future policy requirements is begun.

At the project planning stage five interventions were identified by the project team as influencers on validation.

- Developing and extending regional/national networks and partnerships to include policy makers, social partners and practitioners working on the validation of NFIL
- 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
- 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
- Training and/or capacity building for guidance counsellors and other frontline staff working on the validation of NFIL, including with specific adult beneficiary groups
- Improving access to and awareness of validation services and support among specific adult beneficiary groups

The 'as is' exploration process includes a guide for each country project team to conduct a SWOT analysis in relation to each of the separate interventions within their national context. Is essential for the later analysis of the impact or outcome of the intervention.

### **Next Steps**

Each of the national project teams is in the process of completing their exploration of the current situation with relation to validation in their country using the agreed experimental protocol. These explorations will be collated into a review document and will act to inform and support the detailed planning of the interventions. 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. The next major phase of the project will involve the partners planning their detailed actions and activities in relation to some or all of the interventions listed above, informed by their review of the current situation. 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. This work will be further explored by partners in future work of the VISKA project.

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